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New light on early Insular monasteries

Tomás Ó Carragáin*

HEATHER F. JAMES & PETER YEOMAN with numerous contributors. *Excavations at St Ethernan's monastery, Isle of May, Fife* (Tayside & Fife Archaeological Committee Monograph 6). xii+220 pages, 103 illustrations, 8 colour plates, 66 tables. 2008. Perth: Tayside & Fife Archaeological Committee; 1360-5550 paperback £15.

CHRISTOPHER LOWE. *Inchmarnock: an Early Historic island monastery and its archaeological landscape*. xxii+314 pages, 156 b&w & colour illustrations, 34 tables. 2008. Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland; 978-0-903903-37-0 hardback £30 (Fellows £25).

THOMAS MCERLEAN & NORMAN CROTHERS. *Harnessing the tides: the Early Medieval tide mills at Nendrum monastery, Strangford Loch*. xx+468 pages, 344 b&w & colour illustrations, tables. 2007. Norwich: Environment & Heritage Service/The Stationery Office; 978-0-08877-3 hardback £25.

MARTIN CARVER. *Portmahomack: monastery of the Picts*. xvi+240 pages, 94 illustrations, 16 colour plates. 2008. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; 978-0-7486-2441-6 hardback £75; 978-0-7486-2442-3 paperback £24.99.

The institution of monasticism was instrumental in the Christianisation of the Insular peoples and in forging their identities, yet its study poses major challenges for archaeologists and historians alike. As historian Colmán Etchingham has concluded, '*it cannot be stressed too strongly that the Irish evidence, both Latin and vernacular, reveals no systematic distinction between monastic and non-monastic churches*' (*Church Organisation in Ireland, AD 650 to 1000*, 1999: 457). This accords well with the Irish archaeological evidence: there is a wide spectrum of ecclesiastical sites, which are broadly similar in overall layout (usually delimited by two concentric enclosures), but only a minority of them were monasteries in the primary sense of the term. Though abundant evidence for learning, sculpture with monastic themes and in some cases a deliberately remote location are suggestive, the surest archaeological indicator of monasticism is probably segregated burial. It is only in the last few years that ecclesiastical cemeteries in Ireland and Scotland have been analysed to a high enough standard to allow monastic ones to be identified with certainty (e.g. Illaunloughan, Co. Kerry). We have barely begun to look beyond the skin-deep uniformity suggested by the concentric enclosures to explore the diverse expressions of monasticism that must surely have existed. The four excellent books under consideration here bring us significantly closer to realising this goal. They all provide fresh insights into several aspects of the monastic life, and each of them illuminates one aspect



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with particular clarity, be it the role of monasteries as places of cereal processing (Nendrum), primary education (Inchmarnock), manuscript production (Portmahomack) or healing (Isle of May).

The Isle of May

The *Isle of May*, on the Firth of Forth, is traditionally known as the burial place of St Ethernan who, according to an Iona annalist, died 'among the Picts' in AD 669. A Benedictine priory was established there in 1145 and James & Yeoman's excavations were focused primarily on the area occupied by the later medieval church and cloister. They uncovered some evidence for early medieval farming and metalworking but within the excavated area evidence for early medieval occupation was limited, leading them to conclude that before the tenth century '*any settlement on the island was small-scale and probably seasonal*' (p. 174). One wonders, though, if enough of the site has been excavated to be confident of this conclusion. Assuming occupation was seasonal, the community presumably spent the winter months at a mainland site such as nearby Kilrenny which is also associated with St Ethernan (p. 3). It is a pity that a model along these lines is not developed in this report, as this would give us a clearer picture of the relationship of the May to other ecclesiastical sites in the area.

The excavations uncovered the remains of two stone churches, probably of tenth- or eleventh-century date, under the Benedictine one. These in turn may have replaced one or more wooden churches (pp. 176-7). The churches and associated cemetery were located on a raised cobble beach, which had been augmented and reveted with drystone walling to consolidate it and to provide further space for burial (p. 173). Among the earliest burials (fifth to seventh century) was a cluster of males who may well have been monks. These graves were not marked with cross-slabs, nor is there any other sculpture on the island (p. 174). This does not, of course, undermine the argument that this was a monastery, for sculpture is absent from many monasteries, including for example Emly, Co. Tipperary, chief monastery of the kings of Cashel. By the eighth century women were also buried in the cemetery but the overall ratio of men to women was 4:1. In the case of a disproportionate number of burials in a seventh- to tenth-century cluster there was osteological evidence for serious disease, and a high proportion of later medieval burials also had evidence for chronic diseases (pp. 176-7). James & Yeoman argue that these individuals had come to the site in search of healing. They make a convincing case, though it would have been strengthened by a wider discussion of the role of monasteries (including Whithorn for example) as centres of physical as well as spiritual therapy. This is a well produced volume with very good illustrations and clear colour plans. At one or two points in the text additional illustrations would have been welcome: for example a map to illustrate the excellent discussion of Scottish sites associated with St Ethernan (pp. 3-4). This is however a minor criticism of a book which makes an important contribution to the subject.

Inchmarnock

Moving westwards, *Inchmarnock* outlines the results of Chris Lowe's investigations at a minor island monastery in the estuary of the river Clyde. The volume is beautifully designed and handsomely produced in full colour. The illustrations are superb, though it would have been nice if more photographs of the cross-slabs were included. The report includes a painstaking reconstruction of the pre-improvement landscape and contains the results of a number of excavations, including the partial excavation of a cave which seems to have served as a hermitage (p. 226). The largest trench was at the main monastic settlement around a ruined Romanesque church. The outer enclosure (*c*.50m across) was identified through geophysical survey and test trenches, and there was also limited evidence for an inner enclosure separating the church and cemetery from an iron-working area to the north. Bone did not survive in most of the early burials so the proportion of men to women could not be determined, but there is a vague tradition of a separate women's cemetery (p. 257). Quartz pebbles were found only in later medieval burials, but the author's suggestion that this represents a general pattern is incorrect, for quartz has been found in early medieval burials at several sites including Illaunloughan, Co. Kerry and the Isle of May (James & Yeoman pp. 169 & 176).

Traces of a single-cell stone church were found under the Romanesque one (p. 255). There is little discussion here or in the Isle of May volume about what the churches at these sites looked like. This is understandable given that only foundations were found, but they are unlikely to have resembled the churches shown in the reconstruction drawings. In

Figure 9.7 of the Inchmarnock volume the ninth-century predecessor of the first stone church is imagined as having a round-headed doorway, a west window and two north windows: features never found in Irish pre-Romanesque architecture and therefore unlikely to have existed at a site with such strong Irish links. Irish influence was not as strong on the Isle of May, but in Figure 9.1 of that report the first stone church is depicted as a stone-roofed building, apparently of Gallarus-type. In fact such churches are largely confined to peninsular Kerry and are of drystone construction rather than clay-bonded like the Isle of May church.

At Inchmarnock the distribution of incised slates led Lowe to postulate that there was a schoolhouse in an unexcavated area west of the church (p. 255). Only further excavation could confirm this, but the slates themselves show beyond doubt that this was a centre of primary education. Over 100 pieces were found, including eight with early medieval inscriptions. The island does not appear in early documentary sources but its name means Island of Mo Ernóc. How wonderful, therefore, to discover a slate incised no less than three times with the name Ernán! As the author states (p. 249), this cannot be taken as absolute proof that an Irishman called Ernán founded the monastery around AD 600, but in combination with the place-name evidence it points very strongly in that direction. The early inscriptions include a Latin and an ogham alphabet as well as copying exercises by novices, most likely children. The full implications of this important assemblage are expertly explored. In particular there is a fascinating discussion of the organisation of education within monastic networks: in addition to this new archaeological evidence, hagiography is cited to show that relatively minor sites like Inchmarnock served as feeder schools for major centres of learning and manuscript production, in this case probably Kingarth on nearby Bute (pp. 258-63). Lowe also points out that the depictions of ships, people, animals and buildings on some of the other slates, along with the 35 gaming boards, remind us that monks and novices were allowed some respite from physical, intellectual and spiritual toil (p. 264).

Nendrum

Continuing westwards across the Irish Sea, *Harnessing the tides* outlines the discovery and excavation of two tidal mills at the important monastery of Nendrum, Co. Down. A relatively large number of early watermills have been found in Ireland, but very few of them are tidal mills. The earlier of the two Nendrum mills dates to AD 619-21 making it the earliest known Irish watermill. These unique monuments receive the attention they deserve in this hefty volume. The book is superbly designed, meticulously researched and very well written. It is also lavishly illustrated with numerous colour photographs and exceptional drawings. The use of colour in the plans to convey complex information is particularly effective.

Remarkably the dams of both mills survive in reasonably good condition on the foreshore immediately adjacent to the monastery. The first dam is 110m long and creates a large triangular millpond. Excavation showed that it incorporated a series of timber and wattle revetments and a palisade breakwater (p. 47). By contrast the second dam (125m long) encloses a smaller, more linear millpond which was better-protected and easier to manage (pp. 128-9). The first mill was damaged when the second was built, but there was some evidence to suggest it had two wooden penstocks and therefore two waterwheels (pp. 37-9). The second mill was far better preserved and features an unusual and skilfully constructed stone penstock. The waterwheel hub from the first mill was recovered, along with three wooden paddles and a number of millstones from the second mill.

All of these features are described and discussed with admirable clarity and there is also an interesting analysis of the energy which could potentially be extracted from the second mill (pp. 208-20). In addition, the volume includes an exhaustive treatment of Nendrum's history, which documents that the monastery was in decline by the tenth century. Significantly, the second mill seems to have fallen out of use around then and was not replaced (p. 113). Finally there is a major reassessment of the rich archaeology of the site as a whole, including its enclosures, church, round tower and impressive collection of artefacts, many of which were found during Lawlor's extensive excavations in the 1920s.

Portmahomack

Unlike the other volumes considered here, *Portmahomack* is not a definitive publication but a preliminary statement aimed at the general reader as well as the professional archaeologist. This project is particularly important for two reasons. The first

relates to the position of Portmahomack on the Moray Firth in the heart of Pictland. There is meagre enough historical evidence for the establishment of Christianity and literacy in pre-Viking Pictland, but the sculpture in and around Portmahomack, with its sophisticated iconography and inscriptions, suggested that this was an important centre of learning. By showing beyond doubt that this was so, Martin Carver has made a major contribution to early Scottish history. Furthermore, though he wisely stops short of making a definitive judgement on the issue, by showing that the monastery was probably established in the sixth century he has strengthened the case that it was founded by Columba of Iona who carried out missionary work among the Picts in the 560s (p. 196).

Secondly, this project is particularly important because of the unprecedented size of the area excavated. Apart from towns, major monasteries were the largest and most complex settlements in early medieval Europe. The D-shaped outer enclosure at Portmahomack delimited an area probably more than 250m by 150m. As Jerry O'Sullivan showed in his review of archaeological interventions on Iona (in *Church Archaeology* 2 (1998): 5-18), small-scale excavations usually tell us very little about the overall organisation of sites like these: rather, they deplete a precious and finite resource. Instead it is essential to secure major funding (the Portmahomack project was financed with almost £2 million in Heritage Lottery Funding) so that large areas can be excavated to a high standard. At Portmahomack it proved possible to 'strip-and-map' large areas during the evaluation stage, giving a general picture of the site's layout and providing targets for full excavation later on (p. 29). Two areas 100m or more long by 25m wide were investigated in this way: the Southern and Northern Sectors. The fact that (according to my rough calculations) these constitute about a fifth of the site's area illustrates the great challenge major monasteries pose for the archaeologist. Nevertheless, as a result of Carver's excavations we now know considerably more about the layout and organisation of Portmahomack than that of any other comparable site in Scotland or Ireland.

Before the monastery was established the site seems to have been '*a kind of waste that a king might be happy to grant to an itinerant community of spiritual eccentrics*' (p. 75). Within the excavated areas, most of the evidence suggests that during Period 1 (*c*.550-650) the monastery was established on a relatively modest scale (p. 76), although the Period 1 enclosure delimited an area only marginally smaller than its successor. There was much more extensive evidence for occupation during Period 2 (*c*. 650-780). The Southern Sector was for fine metalworking, perhaps including altar plate. Carver ingeniously argues that the large, bow-shaped 'Smith's Hall' excavated in this area was laid out using ratios belonging to '*the Fibonacci series that tends to the Golden Section*' (p. 130). In the Northern Sector there was a road and, parallel to it, a dam which turned a marshy area into a pond. This may well have been for a mill, though no mill-house was found within the excavated area (p. 118). The most significant discovery of the whole excavation was west of these features: through careful detective work, Carver and Cecily Spall have shown that, for a hundred years or more, this area was used for the production of vellum (p. 124). This is the only definite *parchmenterie* identified at an Insular monastery to date.

The monastic character of Portmahomack is also confirmed by the fact that most of the early graves under the multi-period parish church contained male skeletons. No traces of wooden churches were found, but the thirteenth-century crypt incorporates fabric from a pre-1100 semi-subterranean church. Carver argues that this was built during the eighth-century boom at the site. If he is correct, the building probably represents Anglo-Saxon or Frankish influence for, as he points out, some pre-Viking churches in these regions have crypts (p. 88). He also leaves open the possibility that it represents Irish influence, stating that it '*would not have been out of place in the Ireland or North Britain of the eighth century*' (p. 90). However, mortared stone churches were very rare in Ireland before 900 and there is no evidence for crypts in Ireland before the twelfth century.

In the 1920s Lawlor found evidence for a fire at Nendrum which, on shaky grounds, he attributed to Viking marauders. In *Harnessing the Tides* McErlean convincingly dismisses this interpretation, though, as he comments himself, '*it seems a shame that* [in doing so he has taken] *some of the romance and drama*' out of the site's history (p. 332). Carver has been able to conjure up drama of this sort at Portmahomack, but this time on the basis of sound archaeological evidence. He found that sometime between 780 and 830 there was a catastrophic raid in which the Northern Sector was burned, at least one monumental cross-slab destroyed and at least one member of the community put to the sword. This is a vivid reminder that, while (in Ireland at least)

most monasteries continued to prosper throughout the Viking Age, the initial impact of the Vikings must have been devastating. Equally interesting, though, is the fact that agriculture and metalworking resumed at Portmahomack immediately. According to Carver from the ninth to the eleventh century the site was '*an industrially active farmstead*' (p. 142). There were fewer burials in the excavated area and vellum production ceased. Carver suggests that the church was ruinous throughout this period (pp. 142 & 147), but the evidence for this seems equivocal and we should consider the possibility that the site continued to function as an ecclesiastical centre, even if it was no longer a monastery.

One hopes that this exemplary project will inspire further large-scale investigations of major monasteries. This preliminary publication is a joy to read and should be considered a model for presenting the results of a major research project in an accessible yet scholarly manner. It begins with an engaging, personal account of how the project came about and finishes with a useful (albeit preliminary) digest of evidence. In one or two of the plans different phases could have been distinguished a little more clearly (Figures 3.11 & 4.3), but most of the illustrations are excellent. There are very occasional slips and other errors in all four books under discussion, but in general the standard of copy-editing is high. In any case I do not consider it the purpose of a review article to enumerate minor blemishes: these do not detract from the terrific scholarship in evidence here. Along with a few other recent and forthcoming publications, these books will set the agenda for the archaeological study of Insular monasticism for some time.

Under the same sky: two British settlements in early colonial Australia

Alistair Paterson*

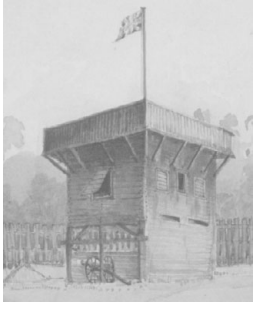
JIM ALLEN. *Port Essington: the historical archaeology of a north Australian nineteenth-century military outpost* (Studies in Australasian Historical Archaeology 1). xvi+142 pages, 111 illustrations, 95 tables. 2008. Sydney: Sydney University Press/Australian Society for Historical Archaeology; 978-1-920898-87-8 paperback AUS$ 49.95 + p&p.

GRAHAM CONNAH. *The same under a different sky? A country estate in nineteenth-century New South Wales* (British Archaeological Reports International Series 1625). x+270 pages, 174 illustrations. 2007. Oxford: John & Erica Hedges; 978-14073-0059-7 paperback £45.

The publication of two archaeological monographs on key Australian colonial sites of the first half of the nineteenth century is a significant event in Australian archaeology. The books will also be of interest to those interested in British settlement and colonial societies more generally.

Port Essington

In 1969 Jim Allen completed the first PhD dissertation in historical archaeology in Australia with his study of this British military outpost. *Port Essington* is the thesis published largely as submitted, with new useful prefaces by Tim Murray and the author. In Allen's 'Retrospective Introduction' we learn that when a Pleistocene topic fell through, Port Essington was proposed by John Mulvaney as a suitable project – which it was. The British settlement of Victoria located on Port Essington in far northern Australia was established in 1838 and abandoned



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