

II.

A VISIT TO EILEACH-AN-NAOIMH (HINBA). By WILLIAM W. IRELAND, M.D., F.S.A. Scot.

In the summer of 1901, along with Mr W. C. Maughen, I visited this island. To Dr Patrick H. Gillies, of Kilbrandon, I am much indebted, not only for his guidance to the place, but also for a large part of the information in this paper. The remarks about the meaning and etymology of Gaelic words are entirely derived from Dr Gillies. He revisited the island last year and took some new photographic views. I am also indebted to Mr Benjamin N. Peach, LL.D., of H.M. Geological Survey, who visited the island last summer, for five photographic views and for some useful notes about the buildings.

After establishing himself at Ii or Iona, to which his possession was confirmed by the Pictish king Bridei, and also by Conall, the king of Scottish Dalriada, St Columba, in the prosecution of his missionary work, planted churches and religious colonies in the islands around—Ethica Insula (Tiree), Elene Insula (off Islay), Scia (Skye), Egea Insula (Egg). Adamnan, in his Life of St Columba, frequently mentions the Saint's visit to the island of Hinba or Himba, where he had a monastery, over which he placed his maternal uncle Ernan. The date of this establishment must have been between A.D. 563 and 574. No island of the Hebrides now bears this name. It has been derived from an old Gaelic word Imbach or Imbeh, meaning a surrounding sea. All traces of the locality seemed to be lost

till the Garvelloch islands were visited by Dr Macculloch in 1824. In the westernmost of them, called by the Gaelic name *Ilachanu*, he lighted upon the remains of some religious buildings and monuments of a primitive form and apparently of ancient date.¹ The island was uninhabited, which goes to account for the preservation of the remains. Dr Reeves, describing them, put the question—Is this *Hinba*? It was reserved for Skene to state the grounds for this belief, in a forcible manner. The converging probabilities which he arrays may be found in Reeves's edition of the *Life of St Columba*.² We are told by Adamnan that the Saint, while staying in the island of *Hinba*, was proceeding to excommunicate some persecutors of the Church, the sons of *Conall*, the son of *Domnail*. One of these malefactors was named *Joan*, of the race of *Gabran*,³ who was chief of the *Dalriad* Scots, on the fringe of which the *Garvellochs* lay. One of their companions named *Lam-dess* (*Manus dextera*) hearing of what was taking place, instigated by the devil, rushed at the Saint with a spear. He was saved by the interposition of one of the brothers named *Findluganus*. *Lam-dess* was killed with a javelin the year after in the island of *Lunga* (*Insula longa*). This is an island in sight of *Eileach-an-Naoimh*. This *Joan* had twice plundered the house of a friend of *Columba*; returning the third time at a place called *Ait-chambas Artmuirchol* (*Ardnamurchan*), the Saint being there, he tried to dissuade the robber from farther plunder, but his interposition was met with derision. The Saint followed the robbers up to the knees into the sea, praying to Christ. Returning to the dry ground, *Columba* prophesied that neither the robber nor his wicked companions would get back to the lands which they desired. Accordingly their ship was wrecked by a sudden storm in the middle of the sea, between *Mull* and *Colonsay*, and all were drowned. This was on the way between *Ardnamurchan* and the *Garvellochs*.

¹ See a *Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, vol. ii. p. 157.

² *Life of St Columba, Founder of Hy*, written by Adamnan, edited by William Reeves, D.D., Edinburgh, 1874, p. 324.

³ *Joan filius Conallis filii Domnallis de regio Gabrani ortus genere. Vita, lib. ii. cap. xxiii.*

There are still the remains of a castle on the island north of Eileach-an-Naoimh, of which farther mention will be made.

Dr. W. F. Skene tells us that Dean Monro, in his description of the Western Isles in 1594, mentions 'Dunchonill,' "ane iyle so namit from Conal Kernache, ane strength, which is als meikle as to say in Englishe, ane round castle."

Kernache is probably *Cathernach*, "a soldier or leader of a company," or what were called from this word 'caterans'; and it seems not unreasonable to suppose that Dunchonall was so called from Conall, the father of Joan, and was the seat of this piratical family, for which, both from its isolated character and its proximity to the mainland territory of the genus Gabran, it was peculiarly appropriate. This confirms the identity of Eileach-an-Naoimh with Hinba.

The Garvelloch islands¹ may be said to be a chain of hills washed by the sea, which has isolated them by breaking through the ancient ravines, now narrow straits. There are many well marked traces of denudation of the softer rocks. The topmost peak of Eileach-an-Naoimh, the top about 270 feet high, bears the name of Dun Bhreanain, or St Brandon's Hill. The north-west shore is very precipitous in some places, presenting a sheer descent of 200 feet. On the southern aspect there are slopes of different gradients; the more level parts are covered with a rich grass; in the hollows there are bushes growing, but no trees. The island is about one and a quarter miles long, and at its broadest

¹ The word is pronounced locally, not Garbheileach, but Garbbhilleach, that is, rough lipped or edged; but even if we say *Eileach*, this means a mound or stony place. Thus the rough mound would be an appropriate name for the rugged outline of Garvelloch. In the same way Eileach-an-naoimh would mean the mounds of the saints, or holy mounds.

Eileach, or more properly Aileach, is probably connected with Ailbhe, *Aint*, and certainly with Al, an obsolete word for a rock or stone. Skene thought Eileach to be a corruption of Eilean, an island, which it certainly is not; we have the very word in the old monkish *Vita Brendani*: *Et in alia regione in Britannia monasterium nomine Ailech sanctissimus Brendanus fundavit*. In the Brussels edition of the same work, Ailech is mentioned as an island: *unum (monasterium) in insula Ailech, alterum in terra ethica*. We may suppose that Ailech was the original title, *naomh* (*holy*) or *naoimh* (*of the saints*) being afterwards added:

about a quarter of a mile. There are dykes of basalt ; but the island is mainly composed of a gritty calcareous shale. A column of rock about 12 feet high, which stands out near the southern shore, has been called the Cranogg, or Columba's pulpit. It is composed of hard quartzite rock, with some slight mixture of carbonate of lime. The softer rocks round

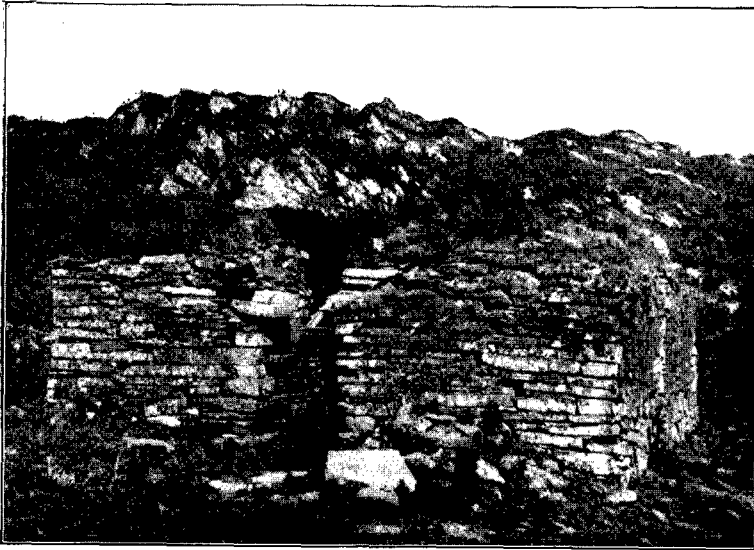


Fig. 1. The Church on Eileach-an-Naoimh, showing doorway in the south wall.
(From a photograph by B. N. Peach.)

have been worn away with the lapse of time, leaving this tough old tusk, which still has on the outside the colour given by oxide of iron. The landing is generally made on a narrow creek on the south-west aspect.

After an easy scramble up the rocks we passed through some marshy ground, and a little higher up, on a more level spot, we came to a rude

building (fig. 1) believed to be the chapel.¹ The roof is wanting, but the walls are entire. They are constructed of wide flat stones, laid upon

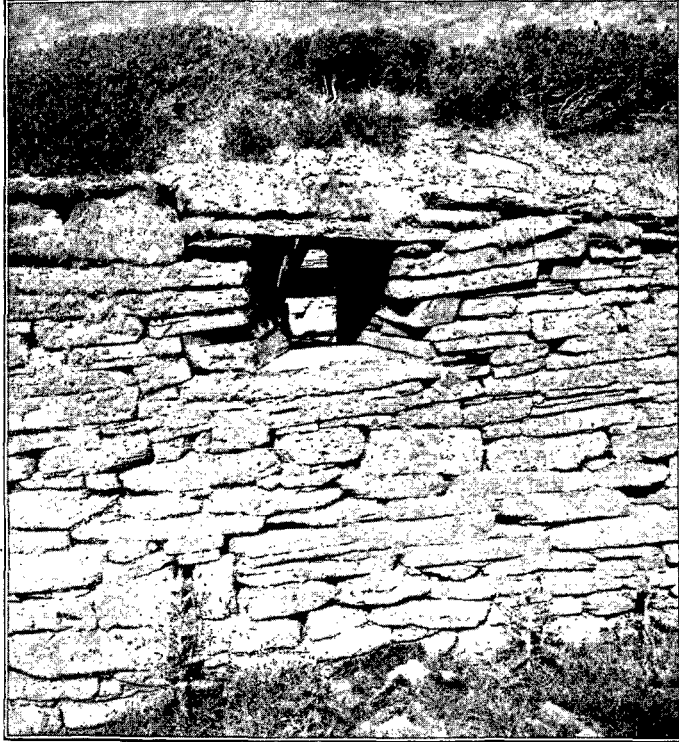


Fig. 2. Exterior view of east wall of the Church, showing the single small window.
(From a photograph by B. N. Peach.)

one another without any lime. The material is obviously taken from

¹ The ruins of the ecclesiastical buildings on the island have been described by the late Mr T. S. Muir in his *Characteristics of Old Church Architecture* (1861), and by Dr Joseph Anderson in *Scotland in Early Christian Times* (1881), where they are figured from photographs taken by Rev. J. B. Mackenzie, Kenmore, in 1869.

the rocks around. The chapel measured about 27 feet by 12 feet exteriorly. The walls are about 8 feet high and 3 feet thick. There is a little splay window in the east end (fig. 2), about 5 feet from the floor and 1 foot 6 inches in width. The chapel is oriented, as nearly as can be, true east and west. On the west side of the building there are clear traces of a square enclosure.

A little higher up the hillside is a smaller building (fig. 3), 15 feet by 10, with two doors opposite one another. The east end is semicircular,

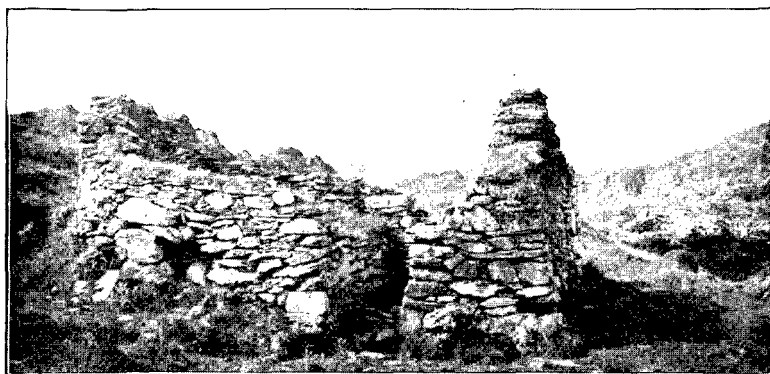


Fig. 3. The Kiln on Eileach-an-Naoimh. (From a photograph by B. N. Peach.)

and two-thirds of the interior is taken up by a raised stone platform, having in the middle a hollow like that of a caldron or boiler. Below, there is a flue going through the basement of the platform to let in air. It is no doubt a kiln for drying corn, to be ground in querns similar to the 'sornies' formerly common in Caithness-shire, which some old people remember still in use.

A little way from the south side of the chapel there is an underground cell, big enough for a man to turn easily in. It has two stone shelves. This was probably the cellar for the wine for the eucharist.

Lower down is a small piece of level ground with ruined wall, which is thought to have been the garden. Around old conventual buildings one sometimes finds rare plants, the descendants of flowers which were cultivated by the monks. We noticed the elder-bush, still a favourite hedge in the Highlands, the corn-marigold, the meadowsweet, the lychnis, and the mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*). All of these are found in the isles around, save perhaps the mullein, which was used as a demulcent by the old herbalists.

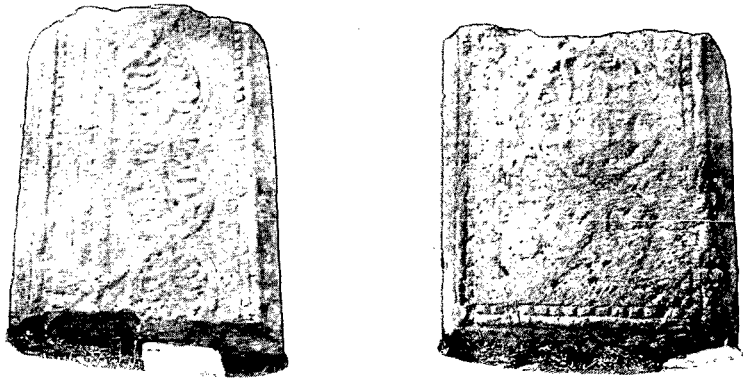


Fig. 4. Portions of Sepulchral Slab on Eileach-an-Naoimh.
(From a photograph by Dr P. H. Gillies.)

Below the garden is the graveyard, clearly indicated by a number of headstones, of the same slate rock as is quarried at Easdale. There are a few rude carvings, and on one slab a Greek cross, but no lettered inscriptions. One gravestone, more elaborately carved than the others, was lying flat beside the chapel. On one side of the face was a sword, on the other a rod, signifying perhaps that the man who rested below had once borne arms and afterwards become a monk. The slab measured 47 by 20 inches, with a thickness of 5 inches. After clearing away the

lichen and dust upon its face, a photograph was taken by Dr Gillies.¹

There is good reason to believe that several of these ancient monuments have been carried away. Macculloch speaks of a number of votive crosses and carvings of the swords of warriors of former days on the grey stones on the burial-ground. A headstone with an incised Greek cross, which was carried away in a boat for ballast, was fortunately rescued, and is now in the Museum. In August 1880 Dr Macmillan and Mr Clerk unearthed a Celtic cross and set it up on the spot. This has now disappeared, and only one stone with any attempt at ornamentation (fig. 4) remains above ground, the one of which Dr Gillies took a photograph. Next summer Mr Peach, who also copied it, found the stone broken through the middle.

About 150 yards south-west of the principal burial-ground, upon a grassy eminence, there is a cairn with headstones (fig. 5), one of which bears a rudely incised Greek cross. According to tradition, in this solitary grave was laid the body of the mother of St Columba.

East of the chapel are the walls of an old building of the same rude structure, ten paces by seventeen. Below these, to the eastward and nearer the sea, were two beehive cells (fig. 6), each having its own entrance and a channel for drainage, and also a passage from one to another, standing like a figure 8. Though half ruined, their contour and structure could clearly be seen. Their diameter from the inside was 14 feet for the larger one, and somewhat less for the other. The thickness of the wall at the base was over 8 feet. The Celtic monks frequently retired to such hermitages, some of which still remain in Ireland in good preservation.²

Not far from the landing-place a trickling spring has been collected

¹ Dr Gillies subsequently wrote, "I have got hold of the old baptismal font of the chapel, which was removed therefrom, as far as I can guess from thoroughly reliable tradition authority, at least 250 years ago. I shall send photos of it, or at least a few sketches and measurements."

² *Church of Scotland, Past and Present*, edited by Dr W. H. Story, p. 154.

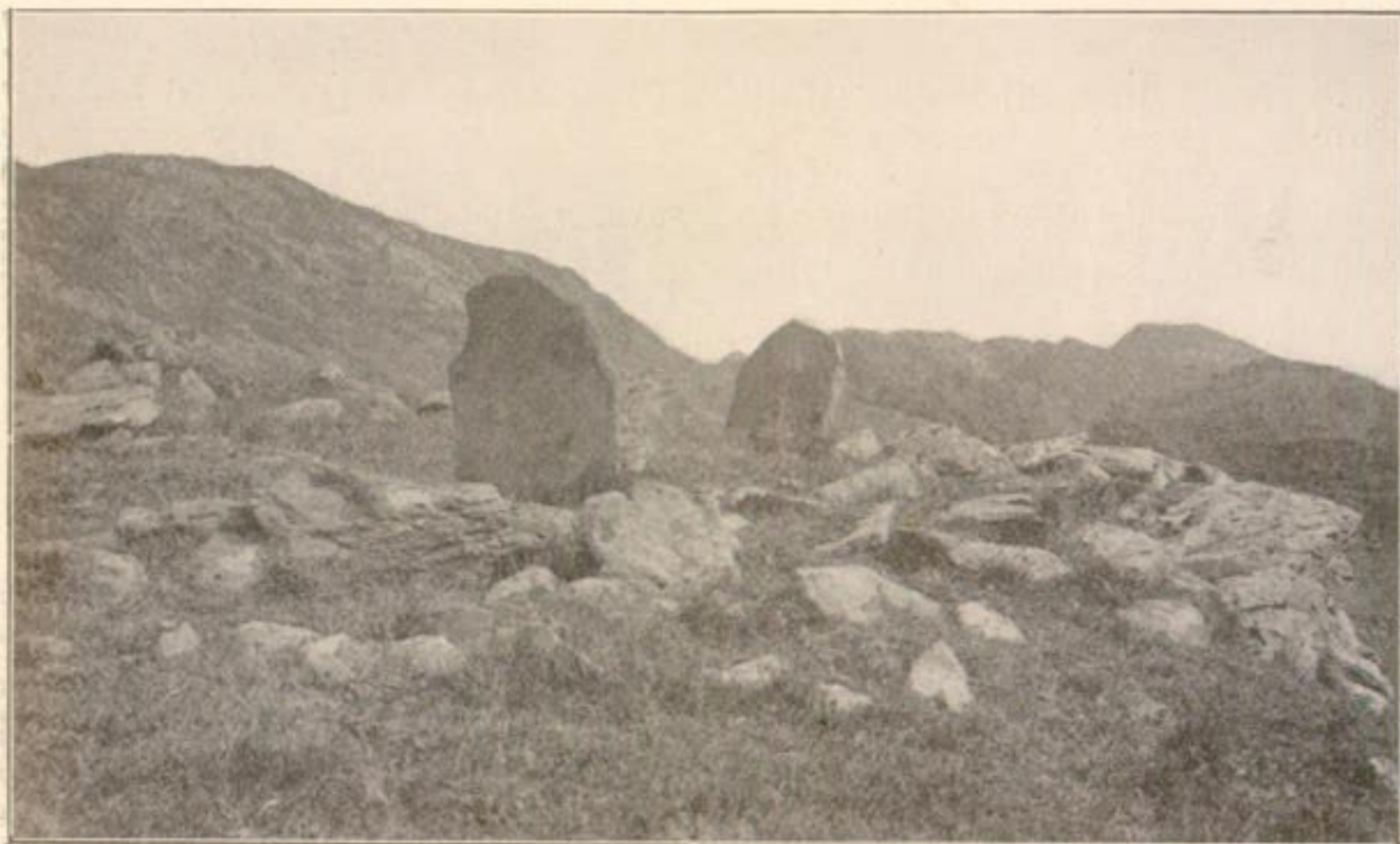


Fig. 5. Burial-enclosure round two headstones at Eileach-an-Naoimh.
(From a photograph by B. N. Peach.)



Fig. 6. Beehive Cell at Eileach-an-Naoimh. (From a photograph by B. N. Peach.)

into an artificial basin, which is called *tobar Challuim-na-chille*, or St Columba's Well.

That these buildings formed part of a small monastic establishment I have no doubt whatever, and they have obviously the air of great antiquity, probably coeval with St Columba himself. It has been objected that the early Scottish monasteries and churches were constructed of hewn wood. This is based upon a passage in Bede, who was born a hundred years after the founding of Hinba; and granting that most of the ecclesiastical buildings were thus made, it can scarcely be proved that they were all so. Where wood failed, stone would be used; and nothing could come in more handy for builders without lime than those broad flat stones.¹ Laid plumb upon one another, they would stand as long as the strata from which they were dug.

We are told in Adamnan's Life that four holy founders of monasteries, named Comgellus Mocu Aridi, Cainnechus Mocu Dalon, Brendenus Mocu Alti, and Cormacus, the grandson of Lothain, passing from Scotia (that is, from Ireland) to visit Saint Columba, found him in the island of Hinba. They would naturally go first to Iona, and not finding him there, pass on to Hinba, which looks as if it were not far off. They all with one mind agreed that Saint Columba should consecrate the mystery of the holy eucharist in their presence, which he did on the Lord's day. Saint Brendan afterwards related that he saw a globe of fire alight on the head of Saint Columba while he was standing before the altar and consecrating the holy oblation. At another time, while the Saint remained in the island of Hinba, he stayed for three days and as many nights in a house, out of which rays of surpassing brightness were seen to issue through the chinks of the door.

The monastic establishment of Hinba seems to have been still kept up while Adamnan was Abbot of Iona (A.D. 679-704). Most likely,

¹ Remains of such edifices (stone churches of the most primitive Celtic type) "still exist in many of the northern and western islands, such as those of Tigh Beannachadh in Lewis, Teampull Beannachadh on one of the Flannan islands, and Teampull Sula Sgeir."—*History of the Church of Scotland*, p. 228.

about the beginning of the ninth century, the isle was visited by the piratical Northmen, when the monks were massacred or saved themselves by flight. There is no proof that they ever returned. Fordun, who wrote his *Chronica Gentis Scotorum* between 1441 and 1447, shows some acquaintance with the isles off the coast of Argyllshire. Though he may have visited Iona, he could scarcely have come near the Garvellochs, for he says that Scarba was fifteen miles long, whereas it is little more than three miles. Fordun mentions Helant Leneow¹ (Eileach-an-Naoimh), and says that there was a sanctuary there. He does not tell us whether it was inhabited, but he mentions the neighbouring castle of Donquhonle,² which at that time was certainly held by the Macleans. He mentions the neighbouring islands of Longa, Seil and Mull, and is particular in noting the religious foundations, monasteries, churches, chapels and cells.

¹ Insula Lyngay, Insula Luyng. Insula Sunay. Insula Sellee major. Insula Sellee minor. Insula Helant Leneow, scilicet, insula sanctorum, et ibi refugium. Insula Garveleane, juxta magnum castrum de Donquhonle, distans ab aliis insulis sex milliaribus in oceano. Insula Mule, ubi duo sunt castra, id est Doundowerde et Dounarwyse—lib. i. cap. x.

² See Donald Gregory's *History of the Western Highlands and Isles of Scotland*, London, 1881, p. 69. This author erroneously places Dunconell in Scarba, and Dunkerd in the Garvelloch isles.