

Obituary

Antony Charles Thomas

26 April 1928 – 7 April 2016

Professor Charles Thomas was a pioneer of Early Christian archaeology in Britain and a champion of Cornish Studies who made a lasting impact on Scottish and Celtic scholarship.

Born in Cornwall, he was a lifelong Cornish activist, from being a founding member of Mebyon Kernow, a Cornish nationalist party, to establishing and directing the Institute of Cornish Studies, but his interests embraced the entirety of the British Isles, with a particular focus on the Celtic west. Although comfortable with prehistoric monuments and an early advocate of multi-period landscape studies, his most enduring contributions to Scottish archaeology relate to the early medieval period.

After his primary education in Cornwall, Thomas attended Winchester College. In 1945

he volunteered for the army and served with the Royal Army Ordnance Corps in Egypt, a posting which reinforced a deep-seated interest in archaeology. Following his army service, he studied Jurisprudence at Corpus Christi College, Oxford (1948–51). While studying law he also began excavating, notably at Gwithian, a sand-covered multi-period site owned by his family, which would nurture a number of prominent archaeologists. Rather than practice law, Thomas studied prehistoric archaeology with V Gordon Childe at the Institute of Archaeology (1951–3).

While working part-time as a tutor for the Workers' Educational Association in Cornwall (1954–8), he continued to excavate at Gwithian (1949–63), where he recognised distinctive forms of late Roman pottery, similar to that previously



excavated by C A Raleigh Radford at Tintagel. Realising the importance of this body of material, he returned to Oxford to start on a doctorate, which led to the establishment of the well-known alphabet classification of post-Roman imported pottery (eg B-ware, E-ware), which remains the pillar of early medieval chronology in the west of Britain and Ireland. The original publication in *Medieval Archaeology* in 1959 was updated by Thomas in 1981 and subsequently was substantially revised and expanded by Ewan Campbell in 2007.

The outstanding discoveries at the multi-period landscape at the Gwithian, his earliest forays into church archaeology (Nendrum monastery, Co Down (1954); East Porth chapel, Teān, Isles of Scilly (1956); Iona Abbey, Argyll (1956–63)), and the serious scholarly endeavour of the pottery research secured Thomas a lectureship at Edinburgh University (1958–67). This appointment provided a platform for further excavations at ecclesiastical sites and established his reputation as the heir to Radford as the leading authority on the Early Church in post-Roman western Britain. The opportunity to work closely with Stuart Piggott also inspired his ground-breaking work on Pictish sculpture.

Thomas' work at Iona was supported by the Russell Trust, which was also sponsoring the Iona Community's restoration of the Abbey, under the leadership of Revd George MacLeod, a fellow Old Wykehamist. Although MacLeod reportedly took a limited interest in the search for the Columban monastery, the old school connection may have helped smooth relations between the restorers and excavators. The excavations, which were scattered across the site, mostly in small slit trenches, were rapidly dug by small teams and, although the tantalising evidence from the early medieval horizons achieved legendary status (not least because of the eminent archaeologists engaged there: Peter and Elizabeth Fowler, Vincent Megaw, Richard Reece and Bernard Wailles), it was never properly published. The recent redisplay of the site by Historic Scotland (led by Peter Yeoman) drew upon Thomas' findings and the subsequent

rediscovery of the excavation archives (in Cornwall) has allowed Ewan Campbell and Adrián Maldonado (2016) to finally reveal the value of that work.

Altogether more satisfactory were Thomas' excavations of the chapel and burial ground on the uninhabited tidal island of Ardwall, off the Kirkcudbright coast (1964–5), which he encountered while digging at Trusty's Law, Gatehouse of Fleet. Ardwall remains the clearest excavated example of an early church and burial ground in Scotland because it fell out of use relatively early in the Middle Ages and was well-preserved. Whether the proposed sequence and chronology will survive the rigours of a future detailed ¹⁴C dating programme remains to be seen, but for the moment it remains a type-site. He also sought evidence for the short-lived Northumbrian See at Abercorn (1965) without success. Although not involved with the excavations at St Ninian's Isle, Thomas contributed his early Christian expertise to the publication of the hoard, not least in recognising the similarity of the shrine-posts to those he found at Iona (1973).

A conspicuous feature of Thomas' scholarly endeavour was his focus on early medieval inscriptions, which connected all of the areas where he chose to work: Cornwall, Wales, Scotland, Ireland and France. Perhaps his first sustained investigation of inscriptions was a major reinterpretation of Pictish symbol stones (1961; 1963), which combined archaeological contexts and imaginative interpretations of the symbols to suggest seeing them as markers of social identity. He saw them as the product of a native Iron Age tradition of carving, a unique northern British expression of status and affiliation. While the very specific readings he proposed for individual symbols have not found universal favour, the idea that symbols had a memorial function has survived and there can be no question that his study revitalised interest in Pictish symbols. It was his sensitivity to the interplay between setting and inscription that marks out Thomas' contribution to the scholarship on the post-Roman inscriptions of southern Scotland, Wales and Cornwall. He

was one of the first to identify the unifying features of the inscribed stones found on the periphery of the later Roman Empire. In many important respects he set the agenda for recent studies of early medieval sculpture, with their emphasis on landscape context. He retained an enthusiasm for the inscriptions throughout his career: every new potential ogham found in the south-west resulted in a phone call to his preferred ogham consultant in Glasgow. Always interested in how the inscriptions could be used to construct historical narratives, latterly he became increasingly interested in numerological readings of the early medieval inscriptions (1994); this controversial strand of his work has not been widely embraced.

Edinburgh saw the start of a distinguished academic career: it was followed by his appointment as the first Professor of Archaeology in Leicester (1967–71) and subsequently Director of the Institute of Cornish Studies, University of Exeter (1971–91). The return to Cornwall marked an end to his excavation work: as director of the institute he promoted a wide range of cultural studies and championing other excavators; for instance, he was instrumental in supporting the new investigations at Tintagel, undertaken by the Glasgow team of Chris Morris and Colleen Batey. More generally, he played a leading role serving on the boards of various national heritage bodies and his contributions to the profession were acknowledged through his fellowship in the British Academy (1989), a CBE (1991) and honorary degrees at Oxford (1983) and the NU Ireland (1996). One measure of his public esteem in Scotland is that he coined the names Strathclyde and Grampian used in the local government reorganisation of 1974.

Although he no longer taught archaeology after leaving Leicester, he inspired generations of students and was an engaging speaker as those who saw his major public lectures can attest. He gave the Dalrymple Lectures in Glasgow twice: in 1969 on ‘The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain’ and in 1992 on ‘And Shall these Mute Stones Speak? Archaeology, History and Insular Memorials’ and he delivered the Rhind



Photo: © The Charles Thomas Estate

Lectures on ‘The Origins of Insular Monasticism’ in 1999. Fittingly, he delivered the first annual Whithorn Lecture in 1992. He was elected Honorary Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 2000.

In reflecting on his legacy, there is a substantial body of scholarship. He wrote twenty books, mostly on archaeology, but also on Cornish history, as well as dozens of articles, along with some poetry. Not surprisingly, his most ambitious work, *Exploration of a Drowned Landscape* (1985) related to Cornwall, a study which is particularly noteworthy for drawing upon a wide range of source material to write long-term landscape history. That said, his influence was strong throughout the British Isles and especially powerful in Scotland, particularly because his innovative studies of early Christianity were largely inspired by his Scottish experience.

Given their similar career trajectories, it is hard not to compare Thomas with Leslie Alcock. Both served in the army at the end of the Second World War, before going to Oxford. Both served archaeological apprenticeships (Alcock with Wheeler, Thomas with Childe) before moving into academic posts. As if by some unwritten agreement, Alcock largely concentrated on

secular archaeology, while Thomas was drawn to ecclesiastical themes. They never worked in Scotland at the same time, which is perhaps just as well as their archaeological relationship was at times a little prickly. Despite not working together, Alcock and Thomas set the agenda for post-Roman Celtic studies after the war. In many ways, Thomas was more of an ideas-person, while Alcock was more focused on excavation technique, but Thomas' ideas were compelling. Until the routine use of radiocarbon dating prompted refinements, Thomas' vision of the coming of Christianity to Scotland, as articulated in *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain* (1971), dominated British archaeology. His notion of an 'undeveloped cemetery' as a precursor to a church was widely adopted, not just in the Celtic west. It is fair to say that Thomas opened up a new field of study: prior to his work, scholars of early Christianity in Britain did not stray far from the historical texts, but he showed how the archaeological evidence could be exploited to enrich understanding of the period, to construct new narratives and raise new questions. His creativity and willingness to utilise the full range of contemporary evidence proved inspirational and the current vibrancy of early medieval archaeology is a testimony to his drive and brilliance.

SELECTED REFERENCES:

- 1959 'Imported Pottery in dark-age western Britain' *Medieval Archaeology* 3: 89–111.
- 1961 'The animal art of the Scottish Iron Age and its origins, *Archaeological Journal* 118: 14–64.
- 1963 'The interpretation of the Pictish Symbols, *Archaeological Journal* 120: 31–97.
- 1971 *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 1973 *St Ninian's Isle and its Treasure*. Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen Press. A Small & D M Wilson co-authors.
- 1981 *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500*. Batsford: London
- 1981 *A provisional list of imported pottery in post-Roman western Britain and Ireland*. Redruth: Institute of Cornish Studies Special Report 7.
- 1985 *Exploration of a Drowned Landscape: Archaeology and History of the Isles of Scilly*. London: Batsford.
- 1992 *Whithorn's Christian Beginnings*. Newton Stewart: Friends of Whithorn Trust.
- 1994 *And Shall these Mute Stones Speak? Post-Roman Inscriptions in Western Britain*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Campbell, E 2007 *Continental and Mediterranean Imports to Atlantic Britain and Ireland, AD 400–800*. York: Council for British Archaeology Research report 157.
- Campbell, E & Maldonado, A 2016 *Russell Trust Excavations on Iona led by A. Charles Thomas, 1956–1963* [Data structure report]. Edinburgh: Historic Environment Scotland.

STEPHEN T DRISCOLL
University of Glasgow