

More than the sum of the parts

Iona: archaeological investigations 1875–1996

by Jerry O'Sullivan

Iona's long settlement history has resulted in uneven and complex archaeological remains, depleted by generations of conservation works on the main ecclesiastical sites. Archaeological investigations at these sites have not always been successful and have yet to produce a coherent narrative of early ecclesiastical settlement on the island. No summary of this work has explicitly stated the full extent and piecemeal nature of successive excavations, or the significance of this for the long term curation of Iona as an early church site of international importance. This is a problem which may offer lessons for the care of other medieval church sites with extensive standing and buried remains.

'Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses; whatever makes the past, the distant or the future predominate over the present, advances us in the dignity of thinking beings. Far from me and my friends be such frigid philosophy as may conduct us, indifferent and unmoved, over any ground which has been dignified by wisdom, bravery or virtue. That man is little to be envied whose patriotism would not gain force on the plain of Marathon, or whose piety would not grow warmer among the ruins of Iona.'

Dr Johnson's famous eulogy on the ruins of Iona (Chapman 1924, 134–38) is far better known than the opinion of James Boswell, his worldly travelling companion. On the same evening in 1773, Boswell confided to his journal that he was disappointed by the Abbey (Pottle & Bennett 1963, 330–38). The ground was mired with cow dung, and nettles stood high as his hat. He had not derived much pleasure, still less inspiration, from his visit to Iona's famous ecclesiastical ruins. This paper echoes Boswell's complaint by offering a sceptical review of archaeological work on Iona over the last 120 years or so, and asks why numerous excavations have revealed so little about the primary monastic settlement.

Iona has been the scene of an extraordinary level of archaeological activity (Fig 1). Most of this work has taken place within the modern precinct of the Benedictine Abbey, the most likely site of the Columban settlement. Scores of trenches have

been opened here by a dozen different excavators; others have investigated elsewhere in the ecclesiastical environs.¹ Reviews of this work are available in the encyclopedic *Inventory* compiled by Ian Fisher for the Royal Commission (RCAHMS 1982), in Anna Ritchie's more up-to-date though briefer *Iona* (1997), and in a recent paper by Finbar McCormick (1997), but no summary has explicitly stated the full extent and piecemeal nature of successive excavations, or the significance of this for the long term curation of Iona as an early church site of international importance. This is a recurrent problem for fieldworkers on Iona, including the present writer, and may offer lessons for the care and investigation of other medieval church sites with extensive standing and buried remains.

Iona's landscape is dominated by rocky outcrops and

Fig 1 Location map of Iona (Illustration: M Givens. Adapted from the Ordnance Survey map with permission of the Controller, Her Majesty's Stationary Office (HMSO). Crown Copyright. MC-98/70)

Fig 2 A view of the Abbey from the north-west, looking across the sound to Mull; part of the earthwork is visible in the middle foreground (from RCAHMS 1982, 31)

low hills (to 100m OD), with peaty hollows or miniature glens between. There are pockets of good grazing, as well as larger tracts of light arable soil derived from wind-blown sand on the northern and western machairs, but the premium location for human settlement is the raised beach terrace which forms much of the more sheltered eastern shore of the island. This is where the present village stands – largely a planned resettlement of the early 19th century – and where most of the other houses on Iona can now be found. It is traversed by the island's only substantial stream (Sruth a' Mhuilinn: the mill stream) and has a prospect of the narrow sound dividing Iona from its much larger neighbour, the island of Mull. This has also been the area favoured by ecclesiastical settlement in all periods. Any view of the raised beach terrace is dominated by the restored Benedictine Abbey, the most conspicuous element in a constellation of minor churches, cemeteries and high crosses, with the ruined Augustinian Nunnery lying further to the south.

Contained on one side by the sea and on the other by a low, inland cliff, this pleasing jigsaw of manicured lawns and postcard ruins is a core place in the Columban story. Because it is so self-contained a scene, it is easy to succumb to the illusion that it offers direct and intimate contact with the primary period of monastic settlement. William Skene (1876) thought so, and attempted to map 6th–7th-

century events onto the 19th-century landscape of the island using evidence from Adomnan's *Vita Sancti Columbae*. Indeed, it is very easy to imagine the island itself as a green and passive blank inscribed with clearly legible evidence of the Columban world. On closer acquaintance, this proves not to be the case. The ciphers that have come down to us from that world – whether from documentary sources, excavated evidence, or the monumental landscape of the island – are not written in bold legible strokes, but in passages of confusing erasure and superinscription (Fig 2).

Adomnan's consecrated island

For the archaeologist as well as the historian, any reading of the landscape of Iona is mediated from the outset by Adomnan's *Vita*. The 7th-century life of St Columba is often cited as a rich source of information on the early monastery. A formula which is commonly repeated was first set out in the 1870s by Adomnan's earliest modern editor, Dr William Reeves:

'He had frequent opportunities for conversing with those who had seen St Columba, and he was now writing on the very spot where his great predecessor had indited his last words, and surrounded by objects every one of which was fresh with the impress of some

interesting association' ('Introduction', 1874; facsimile reprint 1988, 3).

Subsequent commentators have gleaned interesting glosses on terms used in the *Vita* (eg MacDonald 1984; 1997; Sharpe 1995) and Adomnan does offer tantalising glimpses of the fabric of monastic life in the 6th–7th century, with its fishing nets and deer traps, salt stores and harvest labour, book satchels, hand bells and ink horns. But these are glimpses only. What the *Vita* certainly does not offer is a topographic history of early monastic Iona. Close reading can derive no detailed descriptions of the church and burial ground, the monks' houses and farm buildings, or the monastic enclosure and surrounding fields which comprised the main physical features of the primary foundation. To the contrary, Adomnan's account of Iona dedicates the island as a consecrated place, resplendent with divine favour. The images which most often appear in the *Vita* – Columba's writing cell, preparation of the guest house and the passage of white-robed monks to their church – are repeated motifs which refer to an archetypal monasticism of literacy, community and liturgy, rather than to a particular place and history.

Monumental signposts

If the principal written source offers only uncertain, even mythologized knowledge about the Columban scene, the physical monuments might offer more reliable signposts. After all, even amongst farm meadows and mown lawns, each cross and ruined church on Iona has occupied its rooted and particular place for centuries. This may be true, yet these monuments – like Adomnan's *Vita* – refer to the primary decades of the monastic period in an indirect way only. Just as Adomnan presents the island as a consecrated place, the accretion of later monuments presents Iona more specifically as a ritual place. This can be seen in two main trajectories: the amplification of the primary monastic site by its satellite churches and cemeteries and the specific focus of several monuments around the tiny chapel known as St Columba's Shrine.

John Blair was writing about early minster churches when he observed that some were

'merely the nuclei of diffuse constellations, or even extended lines of churches and other related monuments. Groups of this kind might include holy wells, cemeteries and other older ritual sites, as well as chapels of specialised function such as hermitages or retreat houses ... In topographical, ritual and sometimes legal terms, an important minster extended far out beyond its vallum into the territory around' (1992, 257).

This is a passage which transfers readily to several early Irish monastic sites which are amplified by multiple churches of different size and status (eg Glendalough, Innishmurray or Clonmacnoise), but it seems especially relevant to Iona. Here, remnants of a small church and cemetery enclosure at Cladh an Disirt lie beyond the Abbey to the north, and there are other outlying churches and burial grounds to the south at St Mary's Chapel, St Oran's Chapel, St Ronan's Church and the Nunnery. In addition, there were ancient burial grounds – with no known church – at Cladh nan Druineach and Port nam Mairtir to the south, and possibly at Cill mo Neachdain and Cill mo Ghobhannan, within the north-west angle of the *vallum*, as well as at Cill Chainnech, the site of the present (early 19th-century) parish church. Perhaps these were not all ancient cemeteries, and some of the minor churches are undoubtedly later medieval in date, but the overall impression is that a constellation of sacred spaces had already formed beyond the primary monastic area by the end of the early medieval period.

In contrast to this constellation of outlying sites, there is a group of monuments which seems to focus very clearly on the heart of Iona's ritual landscape: the tiny church – probably a mortuary chapel – known as St Columba's Shrine. Adjacent to this are the three high crosses – named for St John, St Matthew and St Martin – which now stand before the Benedictine Abbey. The Abbey church itself can be included in this monumental group, embracing the mortuary chapel at its west front; so can the stone-lined well which stands before the church, and the paved roadway – the so-called Sraid nam Marbh – which leads directly to this nucleus via the supposedly royal cemetery at Reilig Odhrain. Individually, these features span a wide period of time, but their final grouping indicates a long-established and clear focus on the site now occupied by the mortuary chapel. Again, there are clear parallels with some other major Irish monastic sites – Clonmacnoise, Inchcleraun, St Mullins or Innishmurray – where Peter Harbison proposes that major churches were built in the vicinity of founders' tomb-shrines which had become the object of long pilgrim journeys (1991, 147–50). In this context, the Sraid nam Marbh may have been the processional route not only of funerals, but also of pilgrims, perhaps coming to harbour at Port nam Mairtir. Even the remains of the so-called Columban prayer-cell on the rock outcrop of Torr an Aba (Fowler & Fowler 1988) may have been a public monument of this sort, embellished with masses of beach pebbles and a secondary cross to offer early pilgrims an appropriate visitor experience.

Already in the 7th-century *Vita* Adomnan could present Columba's grave as a sacred spot, and Iona as an island where kings were consecrated and angels came in hosts. This literary amplification of Iona's reputation is paralleled

in the physical amplification of the primary monastery by its outlying churches and burial grounds and the clear monumental focus at its centre. But does this point to a primary core in the area of St Columba's Shrine? Some commentators have thought so and believe that this grouping represents *prima facie* evidence for the site of the original monastic foundation (eg RCAHMS 1982, 31–48). Others are less sure and have argued that the primary foundation was in the area now occupied by Reilig Odhrain (Barber 1982, 361–64), or even in the present-day meadowland north of the Abbey (Skene 1876).

Whatever the answer, these monuments represent not only gradual accretions, but active reorganisation of Iona's ecclesiastical landscape for ritual consumption by patrons, clerics, penitents and other pilgrims. Richard Bradley's *Altering the earth* (1996) is a meditation on much earlier prehistoric monuments, but has some relevance for Iona where it considers monuments as mnemonic devices – not memorials which refer directly to past persons and events, but physical cues which guide and structure human actions, especially ritual action, within a particular scene. Although monuments are mnemonic devices, they may also impose new patterns on old ground. Thus, like the *Vita* of Adomnan, it is possible that the surviving landscape of ecclesiastical monuments narrates a mythologized scene, and offers no clear signposts to the location and character of the earliest settlement.

Antiquarians, architects & archaeologists

Archaeology made its entry to this mythologized scene armed with dogged pragmatism, and implicitly promising concise empirical knowledge. By peeling back the smooth green turf, the unreliable surface of things, concrete evidence of the Columban scene would be brought to light, bagged, photographed, described, labelled, and confidently fixed in place and time.

The shadow of the monuments (1870–1940)

The first field investigations made a modest beginning and were ancillary to programmes of architectural conservation. These created the circumstances for some significant chance discoveries: a hoard of 10th-century Saxon coins was uncovered at the Abbey during drainage works in 1950 (Stevenson 1951); and at the Nunnery four silver spoons were found in 1922 (Curle 1924). Scarcely any systematic archaeological work was undertaken in this period. The recorded excavations which did occur were minor, local incisions into the less glamorous zone of stratified sediments and midden debris beneath the lawns. This appears surprising at first, as Iona was already acknowledged to be an internationally important site. The explanation is simple enough. In these early years, a higher priority was the transformation of the medieval ruins – by

consolidation or even facsimile – into a grand monumental presence on the island (Fig 3).

JOHN A SMITH 1875

A major programme of consolidation works was directed in the 1870s by R Rowand Anderson, and the Abbey church was restored in 1902–10. Details of buried drains, paving and wall remnants were recorded at the Abbey by Anderson and his successors, especially P MacGregor Chalmers (NAS 1921–33) and the antiquary Sir Henry Dryden (NMRS MS 28). However, the first consciously archaeological approach to stratified remains was recorded by John A Smith in 1875. Quantities of earth were being removed from amongst the ruins, but some middens were left *in situ* for his inspection. Smith adopted a systematic approach, sieving through these in regular spits. The results were promptly published in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (1877, 103–17).

E W LOVEGROVE 1946; STEWART CRUDEN 1949–50

Thereafter, despite some published commentaries on the ecclesiastical architecture (eg McGibbon & Ross 1897, 47–75), archaeological recorders are silent until the 1940s. Again, a major programme of architectural works was in hand, directed now by Ian Lindsay (1938–65). Lindsay himself probably trenched speculatively throughout the Abbey. There is little record of this in his notebooks or sketch plans, though his correspondence refers to a fruitless investigation within the Chapter House (SDD SC 22042/8). In the summer of 1946, Lindsay encouraged E W Lovegrove, an amateur archaeologist, to trench about between the east range of the Abbey and the neighbouring Michael Chapel. His annotated field sketches and the typescript of a short report record an irregular cutting which exposed areas of paving and medieval lintelled drains (NMRS AGD/23/400; AGD/23/239.1; SDD SC 22042/6). Stewart Cruden's excavations c1950 are likely to have been conducted at several sites over a number of seasons. Unfortunately, the surviving record is negligible. A few photographs record a group of trenches extending westward from St Columba's Shrine to a point beyond St John's Cross, and annotated sketches of these depict a well-laid pavement beneath layers of redeposited soil, rubble and midden material (NMRS Archive; SDD SC 22042/14). An annotated plan of the Abbey shows these and other trenches at two locations in the east range (ACT 1949).

Research excavations for the Russell Trust: 1956–76

Priorities were to change in the following decades when Iona's archaeological potential was at last accorded a higher degree of recognition. An extensive programme of research excavations was undertaken for the first time by Professor Charles Thomas from 1956–63. The benefactor of this

Fig 3 A plan of excavations at the Abbey 1875–1996 (Adapted from the Ordnance Survey map with permission of the Controller, Her Majesty's Stationary Office (HMSO). Crown Copyright. MC-98/70)

work was Sir David Russell. His aim was that 'organised excavation should begin to sort out the many traditions and traces of former occupants and, to this end he provided, by means of a Trust, for a long term campaign' (Thomas 1957b, 10). Indeed it was to become a very long campaign: from the mid 1950s to the mid 1970s, Professor Thomas and his successors opened numerous trial trenches throughout the area of the Abbey precinct and the surrounding meadows.

CHARLES THOMAS 1956–63

The most important feature investigated by Professor Thomas was the early monastic *vallum* ditch. His interpretation of 'the wandering layout of the Iona vallum' (*ibid* 11) was based on the assumption that there was only one earthwork, forming a single circuit. This view has been superseded by information from geophysical surveys and aerial photographs (RCAHMS 1982, 32), supplemented by further excavations (Reece 1981, 1–35; Barber 1982, 362–63), and it is now generally accepted that the traces of earthworks lying around the Abbey are complex and possibly multi-period. The identification of a feature representing sleeper-beam construction (Trenches 37, 40) is also potentially important. An alternative interpretation of this feature is that it may represent a Yeavinger-type (Style IV) plank-walled structure (Hope-Taylor 1977, 36–39; RCAHMS 1982, 40). This type of construction is unprecedented in the archaeological record of early medieval Irish ecclesiastical sites. In the same area (Trench 40a), an extensive spread of iron slag was recorded. It is not certain, however, whether this was actually an industrial deposit, or highly concreted minerals which had naturally precipitated in the compact sands and gravels of the raised beach zone. Within the cloister (Trench 12), excavations failed to establish the history of a stone structure pre-dating the Abbey church, but did identify a mass-burial, or reburial, of skeletal remains against its outer walls (Thomas 1957a, 10). At the opposite, or west side of the cloister (Trench 17), a trench was opened to investigate an observation by Skene (1876, 340) that there were surviving foundations of early medieval cells in that area. These proved to be no more than later medieval lintelled drains (Burley & Fowler 1958, 14).

ELIZABETH BURLEY & PETER FOWLER 1956–57

Investigation of the rock outcrop known as Torr an Aba also formed part of the programme of research which was funded by the Russell Trust (Fowler & Fowler 1988). Here, a small rock platform was occupied by low stone wall butts forming a square structure with a scooped or hollow interior. The walls are thought to have supported a light wooden superstructure. Within this, several large granite slabs were tentatively interpreted as the furnishings of an ascetic's prayer cell. The evidence of Adomnan's *Vita* is

cited – with guarded enthusiasm – to suggest that this may have been Columba's own prayer cell. A later cross base was erected on the summit, surrounded by quantities of beach pebbles within the wall remnants: evidently the site was venerated after the structure became defunct.

RICHARD REECE 1964–74

Throughout the 1960s and 70s, the research excavations funded by the Russell Trust were continued by Richard Reece (1973; 1981). Now, however, practical considerations had begun to reassert themselves within the archaeological programme. Thus, some areas were excavated in advance of construction work, or as an adjunct to the programme of architectural recording which had been initiated by the Royal Commission (RCAHMS 1982). Excavation in Trench VIb, at the east wall of the Chapter House, recorded deeply-stratified sands, gravels and ash spreads ascribed to the early medieval period. In Trench VIc, a considerable depth of sediments was recorded, comprised of building debris, soils, gravels and ash spreads. Finally, south of the Abbey church, Trench VIe was opened to investigate mortared foundations which had been first exposed during conservation work about 1910. Again, excavations here found that deeply stratified sediments of early medieval or pre-Benedictine date survived over a wide area east of the Abbey (Reece 1981, 61).

Excavation in Area III recorded areas of cobbled paving, a stone-filled drain or sump and stratified dumps of sand, gravel and ash, interpreted as the surface debris of a yard or 'working area'. Finds in this area included imported Mediterranean pot sherds, a small bronze bell and three clay moulds which were probably used to produce decorative glass studs. Excavation in Area V investigated the building formerly known as the Old Guest House, west of the Abbey. Here, a concentration of post-holes formed the earliest phase and was interpreted as evidence for a succession of at least two or three timber buildings. The Guest House itself is considered to have been built in the later medieval period and was probably used as the 'free-standing bakehouse and brewhouse of the Benedictine Abbey' (Reece 1981, 36).

Far beyond the Abbey precinct, to the south, numerous medieval burials were crammed into the sandy rock crevices of the shoreline at Port nam Mairtir, some within roughly formed 'long cists'. The assemblage was dominated by women's remains. Two skeletons were radiocarbon dated with results in the mid first and early second millennia AD (Reece 1981, 106).

MARK REDKNAP 1976

This excavation at the west front of the Abbey church was the final episode in the long programme of research excavations which had been begun by Charles Thomas in the 1950s. The aim of the work was to examine the

structure known as St Columba's Shrine as well as the adjacent well, previously described as the base of a round tower. Excavation recorded a number of early features in a buried topsoil layer, including post-holes and linear cuts, but could establish no clear date for these. The Shrine itself was found to be relatively early and was evidently once a free-standing chapel, pre-dating the Abbey church. A later group of features consisted of rough paving cut by several graves of medieval date. (This paving was compared by the excavator to the paved surface of the nearby medieval roadway.) These features, in turn, were sealed by further areas of later medieval paving which were found to be contemporary with the well-shaft. There was no evidence that the well was formed from the foundations of a round tower of early Irish type (Redknap 1979).

State-sponsored rescue excavations: 1979–1991

In some respects, Iona offers a localised history of field archaeology in Britain and Ireland. Thus, the 1970s saw the end of privately-sponsored research work and the emergence in its place of state-sponsored rescue archaeology. Not only the circumstances, but the practice of excavation was changing rapidly: excavation techniques had become more exacting and refined; the full range of natural or palaeoenvironmental sciences was gradually being brought into play; and the level of detail recorded generally exceeded that of earlier investigations.

JOHN BARBER 1979

Excavations at Reilig Odhrain by John Barber in 1979 were undertaken for the Central Excavation Unit (Scottish Development Department/Historic Buildings & Monuments Directorate). The ancient royal burial ground had become too congested to bear continuing use by the local community. Complete excavation of a single large cutting to the north of Reilig Odhrain preceded extension of the cemetery. Though the site was chosen in response to practical needs rather than research considerations, this was one of the most successful excavations on Iona to date. The larger area of excavation was a key factor, but also the wide scientific capabilities which were then being developed at the Central Excavation Unit, assisted by more rigorous techniques of sampling and excavation.

Some worked Mesolithic flint testified to the presence of people on this raised beach terrace from the earliest period of human settlement in Scotland. Other prehistoric features included a series of shallow ditches, possibly field enclosures or drains. Two later ditches could be attributed to the early medieval period. The deep, waterlogged fills of the main *vallum* ditch included quantities of well-preserved wood and leather, as well as abundant faunal remains. Artefacts from elsewhere in the excavated area included medieval and possibly early medieval pot sherds, miscellaneous iron objects and industrial debris

representing metal and glass working. Other early medieval features, though somewhat later than the *vallum* ditch, were the numerous pits and stake-holes thought to represent wooden structures. Remains of a stone-built industrial feature, possibly a corn-drying kiln, were attributed to the later medieval period (Barber 1982).

ALISON HAGGARTY 1983

In 1983 a cutting for the buried plantroom of a new heating system was machine-excavated on a small site immediately east of the Abbey. Alison Haggarty recorded a deep sequence of dumped soils and midden deposits extending to c2.5m below the present ground surface (1988). Finds included miscellaneous animal bones and several iron objects, as well as a large assemblage of medieval pottery which was described by Alan Lane & Ewan Campbell (1988).

IAN MATE & CHRIS LOWE 1988; FINBAR MCCORMICK 1988

Following test-pitting by Chris Lowe & Ian Mate (Lowe 1988), Finbar McCormick (1993) opened a large cutting north-west of the Abbey. A thick layer of cultivated topsoil overlay cobbled paving remnants and a lintelled drain. The drain is likely to have carried fresh water to the reredorter at the north side of the Abbey complex. Finds included 15th-century pottery, several metal objects and quantities of animal bone. Other excavations were undertaken beyond the precinct area and included a section cut across the *vallum* bank. This has proved to be an important trench, as a radiocarbon-dated sample of the peaty topsoil beneath the bank indicated a construction date – not in the 6th century, as expected – but which pre-dated the Columban period by some four or five hundred years.

FINBAR MCCORMICK 1990

Prior to erection of the reconstructed St John's Cross in a permanent display in the Infirmary, a small part of the floor area in this building was excavated in 1990 for the Central Excavation Unit (McCormick 1992). No structures were identified, but finds included medieval pot sherds and crucible fragments representing early metal-working.

JERRY O'SULLIVAN 1991

Finally, excavations on the bank of Sruth a Mhuilinn brought the period of state-sponsored rescue work to a close in 1991. The mill stream was to be culverted where it traversed the western sector of the monastic earthworks. In advance of this, excavation recorded a sub-rectangular pool which had been deliberately cut into the gravels of the stream bed, as well as an adjacent group of large post-pits (O'Sullivan 1994a). These features are most likely to represent the site of an early horizontal water mill (though this example may have been Early Modern rather than medieval).

Developer-funded mitigations

The early 1990s saw the introduction of new Scottish Office policies which place a firm emphasis on avoidance of archaeological features, preferring preservation *in situ* to the large-scale rescue excavations which would formerly have been undertaken. Thus, current protective measures combine with the conservation ethos fostered by the Iona Cathedral Trust to ensure that the ecclesiastical environs are exempt from development works on any significant scale. (For instance, a site for the Iona Cathedral Trust's new workshop and visitor centre was found on Mull, within view of Iona, rather than on the island itself.) Nonetheless, intermittent archaeological activity on the island is generated by the work of private utility companies, or by the Trust's own ongoing maintenance and restoration work.

JERRY O'SULLIVAN 1992; 1996

Archaeological excavation in St Ronan's, the ruined medieval parish church, was undertaken by AOC (Scotland) Ltd in advance of building refurbishment by the Iona Cathedral Trust (O'Sullivan 1994b). An earlier and smaller church was found to underlie the walls of the standing medieval ruin. This was pre-dated by oriented graves, possibly of early medieval date. Numerous later graves were ascribed to the post-Reformation or Early Modern period. Analysis of the skeletal remains confirmed that the church cemetery had been exclusively for burial of women.

Finally, there have since been several other, minor archaeological interventions in recent years, chiefly in the form of watching briefs or trial trenching. Notably, a minor excavation in Reilig Odhrain in 1996 recorded a remnant of the medieval cemetery enclosure described in 1540 as 'a fair kirkyard biggit about with stone and lime' (O'Sullivan 1998).

Geophysical surveys

Non-intrusive work has also yielded useful results. Resistivity survey guided Richard Reece's programme of earthwork investigations in the 1970s (Balaam 1981), but far more extensive geophysical survey results were subsequently published by the Royal Commission (RCAHMS 1982, 32). This form of investigation was especially successful in the area to the south of the Abbey where a complex of plough-truncated earthworks was identified.

A second episode of resistivity surveys was commissioned by the Iona Cathedral Trust to investigate the area of the modern precincts at both the Abbey and the Nunnery (GBS 1995). At the Nunnery, a broad, curvilinear magnetic anomaly appears to respect the north-east corner of the convent buildings and may have been a track or road. In the same area, a rectilinear group of high resistance anomalies may represent buried wall-butts. At the Abbey, numerous geophysical anomalies could be correlated with

known features (walls, paths or service structures) and clear linear traces to the south and east of the claustral buildings are probably buried drains. A group of weakly-defined, rectilinear anomalies within the north-west angle of the present boundary wall suggests buried wall remnants, but these are likely to be relatively recent garden beds.

What results?

This brief review can do no more than offer a glimpse of the number and variety of archaeological investigations on Iona to date. As each ground-breaking venture has reduced the total sum of a finite archaeological resource, it is worth asking whether the high level of activity has yielded a corresponding harvest of information. The answer is that successive archaeological investigations have yet to produce a coherent narrative of the island's earliest ecclesiastical settlement. There are several reasons for this. Some are inherent in the character of the archaeological remains, others relate to the management of the buildings. These problems have been compounded, however, by the way in which the stratified remains have been sought by successive archaeological investigators.

The formation and management of an archaeological resource

Iona's ecclesiastical settlements developed over a thousand years (Fig 4). This alone will have taken a toll on the accumulating archaeological remains. Limited excavations at some larger early Irish church sites – such as Moville (Ivens 1984) or Armagh (Brown & Harper 1984) – indicate that the use of any particular area does not remain constant throughout the early medieval period: burial grounds are replaced by workshops, industrial areas by other buildings, and so forth. Added to this mundane pattern of scouring and superinscription is the exceptional factor of Iona's importance as a pilgrim site. Thus, its development as an ecclesiastical settlement has been amplified by its development as an arena for controlled public access and ritual. Beyond the period of its early medieval *floruit*, Iona was subject to a whole new period of transformation and reorganisation by the Benedictine community. There is ample evidence that the establishment of other later medieval abbeys and priories in Scotland was characterised by energetic programmes of landscaping or site preparation and, on Iona too, some evidence for this can be found in the archaeological record (eg Reece 1981, 55–62; Haggarty 1988). Furthermore, the environs of the Abbey would certainly have been subject to intensive cultivation in this period, and the deep topsoil within the precinct has been attributed to Benedictine gardeners (McCormick 1993). This soil was produced not only by adding manure, midden materials, lime and seaweed, but by deeply milling the existing Columban or early medieval strata.



Fig 4 A plan of archaeological features and other archaeological interventions throughout the raised-beach terrace which forms the setting for Iona's ecclesiastical monuments (Adapted from the Ordnance Survey map with permission of the Controller, Her Majesty's Stationary Office (HMSO). Crown Copyright. MC-98/70)

This sort of reworking and reorganisation has continued throughout the modern period, despite Iona's remote island location. The physical fabric of many Scottish abbeys and priories suffered badly after the Reformation, as the ruins were commonly quarried for stone and the sites taken into other forms of landuse. In contrast, Iona's medieval ruins have been cherished; but, ironically, this has been the cause of an invasive modern history. Major programmes of conservation, landscaping or reconstruction took place in the 1750s, the 1870s, the early 1900s, the 1930s–60s and again in the 1990s. In terms of conservation and enjoyment of the ecclesiastical buildings, these must be regarded as positive and sometimes creative interventions. But from a narrower point of view, they have drastically depleted the buried archaeological resource. During the earlier works, in particular, unrecorded quantities of stratified material were removed from amongst the later medieval ruins, and, beyond the buildings themselves, all phases of restoration have included landscaping works on some scale.

Keyhole investigations

The same difficulties are often found to occur on extensive archaeological sites with standing medieval buildings. Iona, however, has suffered a form of depletion which relates directly to the conduct of archaeological work itself. The prevailing approach, in every decade, has favoured dispersed trial trenches and test-pits, or small excavations limited by the extent of associated development works. Remains of primary settlement evidence are notoriously elusive on early medieval sites in these islands, both secular and ecclesiastical. On early Hiberno-Scottish church sites, domestic and industrial activities are most likely to be represented by dispersed, amorphous spreads of ash, slag or burnt bone, while structures will most likely be represented by the truncated negative features – pits and wall-slots or slight foundation trenches – representing earth-fast timber buildings. Features of this sort are not susceptible to discovery and interpretation via keyhole incisions, especially on a large, complex site. It is irrelevant here whether such cuttings are research-driven or in response to a rescue/development need. What is important is that this approach has not worked. Indeed, Richard Reece made a frank observation about one of his own cuttings – which exposed a complex stratigraphy of early medieval sediments but failed to derive a significant interpretation – when he admitted that 'the information extracted in a small trench was not commensurate with the information which was destroyed' (Reece 1981, 56).

Burials, buildings and boundaries

Burials, buildings and boundaries are central strands in the investigation of any early church site and can supply

examples in the present case which illustrate the difficulty of deriving a coherent overall narrative from Iona's piecemeal archaeological record.

Burials: the women's cemetery

Reilig Odhrain is the only cemetery on Iona which is still in use. It is uncertain whether this was the primary burial ground of the monastic community or, alternatively, was first amongst a series of secondary or satellite cemeteries. Human remains or possible grave cuts have been recorded at several sites within the Abbey precinct, but larger groups of burials are recorded at only two sites. The first is the group of skeletal remains excavated from the sandy crevices of the shoreline at Port nam Mairtir (Reece & Wells 1981); the second is from St Ronan's, the ruinous medieval parish church (O'Sullivan 1994b). Here, the standing ruins were found to overlie remains of an earlier and smaller church. Both the ruined church and its environs were used for women's burials only in the post-medieval period (Lorimer 1994) and there is a strong likelihood that this perpetuated a much older tradition of segregation by sex. This is a key question in understanding the social and ritual history of Iona's earliest monastic settlement, but it is unanswered in the archaeological record for a variety of practical and strategic reasons.

Though the later burials survived well, the earliest had almost entirely vanished within the acidic conditions of the raised beach gravels, so that neither radiocarbon dates nor a full palaeopathologist's report could be obtained. Further, the earliest burials were badly damaged by the construction of the tiny early medieval church over them; in fact, the walls of this building had intruded into the earlier graves. Prior to excavation the earlier church was completely unknown, as its walls had been levelled and robbed for the construction of the later medieval parish church. In the post-Reformation period, this latter building itself became ruinous and was incorporated into the surrounding cemetery so that the stratigraphic record of its interior is dominated by later, post-medieval burials. Thus, the archaeological resource was simultaneously depleted and enlarged in a variety of ways by ongoing use of the site.

Successive conservation works also played a role here. The later building was consolidated in the 1870s and again in the 1920s. When the excavation was completed, it was refloored and reroofed, to house a display of medieval sculptural fragments. Thus, the uppermost burials had probably been truncated by some unrecorded episode of earlier conservation work in which sediments were removed from within the church to level its floor area. The aim of the work was also to reduce the floor area, as the excavation was conducted to a specific architectural brief, so although the redevelopment of the church supplied the circumstances for a significant new excavation, these same circumstances set firm limits to the scale of the

investigation. Only as much of the internal deposits were removed as was considered necessary for consolidation and reflooring and when the fieldwork programme pressed on to record the earlier church and underlying graves, this could only be done within a narrow sample trench. Thus, the earliest levels were partly exposed but remained substantially unexcavated and nothing beyond the building was excavated, so that no information was recorded on the extent of this cemetery, whether it was enclosed or, critically, how it came to be incorporated within the precinct of the Nunnery.

The published excavation report (O'Sullivan 1994b) – as is often the case – dwells on the positive aspects of the project, rather than on these shortcomings. In retrospect, it might have been better in the long term simply to note the presence of the early building and withdraw, without making a deep keyhole incision in the earlier strata.

Buildings: *magna domus* or farmyard pen?

The stratified remains of early medieval buildings are elusive in all but the most favourable circumstances. The earliest community on Iona did not build in stone. Stone churches on Hiberno-Scottish ecclesiastical sites would not have appeared until at least the 8th century and the earliest domestic and farm buildings on the island would also have been of timber. Adomnan's *Vita* cites building repair with withies, and with larger timbers of pine and oak (Sharpe 1995: II.3, II.45). Excavation in the waterlogged *vallum* ditch recovered numerous worked wood fragments, including several structural timbers (Barber 1982), but these are the sole glimpses to date of a landscape of early medieval buildings which is otherwise represented only by the post-holes recorded throughout the area of the Abbey precinct. Only one group of these post-holes suggests the ground-plan of an early building. This is the double arc of pits – tentatively dated to the 7th or 8th century – recorded by John Barber's excavation north of Reilig Odhrain (1982). With a projected diameter of c20m, this would be twice the size of the largest known Irish building of the period (an 8th–9th-century round-house on Moynagh Lough crannog, in Co Meath, measuring c10m in diameter (Bradley 1993)). Opinion is divided as to whether this immense structure was

the communal house of Columba's monks – ie the *magna domus* described by Adomnan (MacDonald 1984, 284–89; 1997, 34–38) – or simply a large livestock pen, built with especially stout timbers to resist the energetic rooting and scratching of pigs (McCormick 1997, 53). More to the point, this single putative example represents the only ground-plan of a timbered structure to be derived from the scores of trenches which have been excavated throughout Iona's ecclesiastical environs.

Boundaries: monastic *vallum* or prehistoric settlement enclosure?

The monastic *vallum* was noted by numerous early visitors to Iona as some sort of artificial landscape feature, but O G S Crawford (1933, 462) was the first field archaeologist to describe the scale and form of the surviving earthwork, and to appreciate its possible relationship with the primary monastic site. Some years later, Charles Thomas made the first exploratory cuttings across the projected line of the

Fig 5 The extent of the early monastic earthworks, based on evidence from air photos, geophysics and upstanding remains (from RCAHMS 1982, 32)

earthwork where it had been levelled beneath the lawns and meadows about the Abbey. The results were puzzling. Those sectors which could be identified from trial trenching did not add up to elements of a regular overall plan; this is reflected in the meandering earthwork reconstruction which was published by Professor Thomas in *The Early Christian archaeology of North Britain* (1971, 30). In fact, several factors were at work to thwart a successful reconstruction. The search for a single *vallum* was a flawed enterprise in any case as it is now known that the earthworks were complex and perhaps multi-period. This could not be recognised by earlier excavators, partly because the earthworks had been erased by ongoing use and reorganisation of the site over several periods; but also because the limited information available from trial trenches alone would never be adequate for a reconstruction. The interpretation offered by Ian Fisher and his team from the Royal Commission (RCAHMS 1982, 32) is undoubtedly closer to the mark. Here, aerial reconnaissance and electrical resistivity survey were brought into play. But although this reconstruction is generally accepted as the definitive plan on present knowledge, it is not the only one. An alternative reconstruction by John Barber (1982) favours the view that the ancient cemetery of Reilig Odhrain occupies the site of the primary monastic enclosure, which was subsequently expanded to encompass the area now occupied by the Benedictine Abbey (Fig 5).

A further element of doubt was added by Finbar McCormick's excavation of a section trench through the western sector of the *vallum* in 1988 (1993). A sample of the peaty topsoil beneath the bank returned a radiocarbon date in the first or second century AD, indicating that the *vallum* – the one feature which had hitherto been attributed to the primary Columban period by all parties – might actually be a much older earthwork. Again, the problem here is one of scale. The riddle of Iona's earthworks will never be entirely resolved by piecemeal and opportunistic excavation, but only by a concerted programme of excavations conducted within a comprehensive research design.

Conclusions

Iona is beguiling and challenging. No other early ecclesiastical site, indeed no other site of any period in these islands, has been the subject of so much archaeological fieldwork. Despite this, extensive excavations have yet to produce a coherent archaeological narrative. Though we have become attached to the idea that the island landscape offers intimate access to the Columban scene, the main narratives of this – either Adomnan's *Vita* or the monumental tableau of churches, cemeteries, crosses and earthworks – refer only indirectly to this world and may even offer misleading signposts. Archaeology claims

the special privilege of access to concrete evidence which can be fixed in time and place, but a long and complex settlement history has produced an uneven archaeological resource, and the surviving remains have been further depleted by successive conservation works. The excavation strategies which have been applied to this resource have not always been appropriate or successful. Often, excavations have not been carried out in the context of any overall research strategy, but in direct response to the requirements of ongoing development. Even in those cases where research was the primary or sole objective, too many small cuttings have resulted in a piecemeal record with little potential for overall integration or synthesis.

There have, of course, been many important individual discoveries, and some of these point to the potential of further work. Mark Redknap's excavation of an area adjacent to St Columba's Shrine discovered that, despite successive conservation and reconstruction works, undisturbed layers of complex medieval stratigraphy do survive in the immediate vicinity of the Abbey (Redknap 1979); and excavations by Richard Reece and Alison Haggarty have demonstrated the existence of extensive and deeply stratified early medieval sediments in areas east of the Abbey (Reece 1981; Haggarty 1988). John Barber's investigations north of Reilig Odhrain attest to the value of open area excavations on a large scale (in contrast to the numerous key-hole excavations of earlier fieldworkers), and also demonstrate the existence of well-preserved organic artefacts and environmental materials (1982). At the Nunnery, despite the largely unrecorded removal of stratified deposits during early conservation works, the excavation of St Ronan's Church has indicated that an unsuspected horizon of earlier ecclesiastical monuments may be represented by buried features and this area should certainly be regarded as having a high archaeological potential (O'Sullivan 1994b).

A future programme of work might explore some of the outlying cemeteries and their associated churches. This would help to characterise and date the elaboration of a ritual landscape of sacred spaces on Iona. Closer to the Abbey, the development of public spaces for medieval pilgrims is a fascinating subject which would certainly reward further excavation, especially at the west front of the Abbey church, in the area around St Columba's Shrine. Finally, although trial trenching has been shown to be generally unrewarding, a programme of keyhole excavations, guided by the existing information from geophysics and air photos, could be invaluable in characterising and dating the development of the earthwork complex, and would certainly recover quantities of palaeoenvironmental materials from secure contexts.

New investigations are strictly regulated, however, by existing Scottish Office policy, and are scrutinised both for the quality of their research designs as well as for their

provision of adequate resources for post-excavation analyses and publication. The area around the Abbey defined as a scheduled ancient monument has recently been extended to include the adjacent meadows, so that the whole area of likely early monastic settlement is now protected against any form of ground-breaking work. An even larger area is designated a conservation area, and almost every part of the island which was not originally endowed to the Iona Cathedral Trust is now owned by the National Trust for Scotland.

Despite this overarching legislative embrace, concessions are still made every year to the minor ground-breaking works associated with ongoing maintenance and development. Thus, last year's national fieldwork gazetteer, *Discovery & Excavation in Scotland* (CSA 1996), records local interventions by several field units, including the Scottish Urban Archaeological Trust (SUAT), Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division (GUARD), AOC (Scotland) Ltd and Headland Archaeology Ltd. This continuing archaeological presence on Iona has a positive side: it represents the will of the authorities to impose monitoring or site preparation on all ground-breaking works within archaeologically sensitive areas. But perhaps it is time at last to be more creative and insist on design solutions in maintenance and development work which do not require that each year, another small portion of the island's archaeological fabric is quarried away.

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Notes

1. This paper is not concerned with the excavated later prehistoric settlement at Dun Cul Bhuirg (Ritchie & Lane 1980).

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