

Baldred's Auldhame

An early medieval chapel and cemetery

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In early 2005, AOC Archaeology Group was called in by Historic Scotland to investigate some human skeletons unearthed by ploughing near Auldhame, East Lothian (Fig 1). The subsequent excavation led by Erlend Hindmarch revealed the remains of a previously unknown early medieval chapel and graveyard, possibly associated with St Baldred. It overlay an Iron Age promontory fort, the ditch of which came to define the boundary of the later graveyard.

The area around Auldhame is steeped in history and associations with St Baldred who founded a monastery at nearby Tynningham and lived a life of solitude on the Bass Rock, situated in the Firth of Forth and visible from the site (Fig 2). Information on the exact time when Baldred lived is varied and contradictory with dates varying from the 7th to the 8th centuries. It has been suggested that there may have even been two individuals called Baldred (Ritchie 1880).

Preliminary comparative evidence with such sites such as The Isle of May (Yeoman 1998) and The Hirsell, Coldstream, Berwickshire (Cramp and

Douglas-Home 1980) indicates the chapel at Auldhame may date from the 10th century (Yeoman pers com) but there are burials which clearly pre-date the chapel and which, together with other partial structural remains, may be contemporary with St Baldred. A church still existed at Auldhame in 1637 (Waddell 1893, 4) with its ruins still apparent on the sea-cliffs in 1770, but was soon after removed (Chalmers 1887–94, 2:546–7).

Over five months, the AOC team, with the assistance of substantial numbers of local volunteers, recovered 240 individuals from the graveyard. A further 66 burials were identified which were



Fig 2 – General view of the Auldhame site with the Bass Rock in the background (Photo: AOC Archaeology Group)

deemed 'safe' from ploughing and therefore left *in situ*. At least three phases of burial activity are clear from the alignment of the graves and initial Carbon 14 dating of six skeletons has allowed tentative sequencing to take place. The earliest of these groups are aligned north-west to south-east and are dated from between 680AD to 880AD. The second group has an east-west alignment the same as the chapel remains, and has been dated to 890AD to 1030AD. These two groups were concentrated on the south side of the chapel while a third group, aligned south-west to north-east and dated from 1280 to 1400, were a distinct group separated from the rest at the west end of the chapel. This group consisted of mostly juveniles whilst the two earlier groups were of mixed age.

Graves were also seen to have been cut by the construction of the chapel and a dated skeleton suggests that the chapel remains can not have been built before 900 AD. Together with changes of

alignment, this suggests that an earlier chapel may have existed at the site. Further research during the post excavation phase may strengthen this hypothesis.

The type of burial also varied across the site. The majority were simple earth-cut graves but distinctive cists and coffin burials were also present. Grouping of graves with regard to demography has yet to be analysed but a significant number of neonates had been buried very close to the central south wall of the chapel – perhaps a way of sanctifying unbaptised infants. A deposit rich in beach shells was identified over part of the site, indicating perhaps that the graves were once marked with cairns of shells before being ploughed away after the graveyard ceased to be used.

The primary objective of the excavation was to recover the human remains that had been damaged by the plough and also those shallow enough to be at risk from further ploughing. As such it was not possible to fully excavate the chapel remains but merely to reveal

Fig 3 – Plan of chapel remains (AOC Archaeology Group)

Fig 4 – The promontory fort, with the excavated chapel clearly visible. The ditch of the fort is visible as a broad band of slightly darker soil. (Photo: RCAHMS)

its plan. However, it was clearly seen that the building consisted of at least three phases with expansion being carried out toward the east (Fig 3). Based purely on style and construction techniques it is believed that the earliest part of the building was the western structure. The remains show a freestanding single celled structure with a possible apsidal western end, built from unworked clay bonded stone. The lack of debris associated with a slated or stone roof may indicate this building had a turf roof. The second phase was seen as a single mortared wall running between the first phase to the west and the third phase to the east. The final phase consisted of three mortared walls forming the chancel of the chapel, which appears to have been used for a number of higher status burials. Finds of roof tiles here suggest the nature of roof at this end of the structure. Simple internments were found within the west end of the chapel while the eastern end contained coffin burials and possible cist burials (unexcavated) indicated by large stone slabs.

The limited excavation of the site revealed other features which pertain to Iron Age occupation of the site. Of particular interest was a large ditch which can

be seen on aerial photographs, which demarks the Iron Age promontory fort (Fig 4). A section dug through this ditch seemed to indicate that it had been altered with the bank changing sides thus altering the function of the ditch from that of defence to that of demarcation ie a *Vallum Monasterii*. The lack of excavation of the site means it is not possible to make any conjecture about continued use of the site from the Iron Age to the medieval period or whether there may be a link with nearby Tantallon Castle. As the post excavation phase of the project progresses more information may be found.

Finds from the site include Iron Age and medieval pottery and brooches and other metal artefacts. Few grave goods were found but of particular note were an iron blade, two strap ends and possible stirrups from a single burial. Analysis of the artefacts and the shell-rich deposits will form part of the post-excavation programme but the bulk of the work will be concerned with the skeletal assemblage.

Since the completion of the excavation, Melissa Melikian has assessed the skeletons. The Auldham assemblage of 240 individual skeletons is one of the

largest assemblages of such an early date from East Lothian. The assemblage consists of 30 neonate/infant individuals, 44 juveniles and 166 adults. Within the adult assemblage there was an approximate ratio of 1:1 in terms of gender. A number of pathologies were observed in the sample including fractures, klippel-feil syndrome (congenital fusion of cervical vertebrae), osteoarthritis, rotator cuff disease (damage to shoulder tendons), intervertebral disc disease and periostitis which often occur within skeletal assemblages.

The material will undergo a population-based, detailed osteological analysis and further studies are proposed, in particular isotope analyses to examine the origins and the diet of the population. The assemblage is considered to be of national significance and we hope that the data from this assemblage will contribute to a number of current national osteological research projects.

On completion of the excavation the chapel remains were covered with protective matting and re-buried. The land owner has already taken the site out of cultivation and a management agreement is currently being devised.

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