An Iona of the East: The Early-medieval Monastery at Portmahomack, Tarbat Ness

By MARTIN CARVER

A NEW research programme located on the Tarbat peninsula in north-east Scotland offers the first large-scale exposure of a monastery in the land of the Picts. A case is argued that the settlement at Portmahomack was founded in the 6th century, possibly by Columba himself, and by the 8th century had developed into an important political and industrial centre comparable with Iona. Signs of the monastery's former prominence survive in workshops producing liturgical objects, possibly including books, and in the brilliant art of the Tarbat cross-slabs at Portmahomack, Nigg, Shandwick and Hilton of Cadboll. The monastic institution, which had contacts with Northumbria and beyond, seems to have been expunged by the 11th century, probably in the context of political struggles between Scandinavian, Pictish and Scottish interests.

The Tarbat Peninsula, which juts out into the Moray Firth (NE. Scotland), has been under intensive archaeological investigation since 1994.[1] Although the fieldwork programme is not yet complete, it is now plausible to propose that the peninsula was the site of an Early-medieval monastic estate, complementary in many particulars to the island of Iona on the other side of Scotland. The focus of the investigation is the early ecclesiastical centre at Portmahomack, hitherto unseen although occasionally anticipated.[2] The new excavations have shown that a Christian mission was established there by the later 6th century, had grown to international status by 800, and shortly afterwards was partly destroyed and largely

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[1] See Bulletin of the Tarbat Discovery Programme 1–7 (1995–2002) posted at *http//:.york.ac.uk/dept/arch/staff/ sites/tarbat*, cited henceforward as *Bulletin*. At the time of writing (2003) the excavation campaign is due to finish in 2007.

[2] The crypt at Portmahomack was assigned to a chapel of St Columba by Cosmo Innes, W. Anderson, J. Robertson, J. Brichan and J. McNab, *Origines Parochiales Scotiae: The Antiquities Ecclesiastical and Territorial of the Parishes of Scotland* (2 vols.), 2:2 (Edinburgh, 1851–55), 434. Julian Brown made a case for a Pictish provenance for the Book of Kells, with Tarbat as a possible centre of production: 'One or more court monasteries or churches must have existed among the Picts; and if we cannot say where they were, the groups of stones from St Andrews, Meigle, Aberlemno, St Vigeans and the Tarbat-Nigg area . . . show what sort of work they were able to do. The Pictish cross-slabs make just as good a monumental background for the [Book of Kells] as the crosses of Northumbria or Iona': Julian T. Brown, 'Northumbria and the Book of Kells', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 1 (1972), 219–46, at p. 241. Isabel Henderson has long been an advocate for a monastery at the Tarbat site: 'The slabs in Easter Ross certainly suggest that this district supported at least one important ecclesiastical foundation — perhaps at Tarbat, where there are fragments of a number of particularly fine cross-slabs': I. H. Henderson, 'Inverness, a Pictish capital', 91–108 in Loraine Maclean of Dochrarroch (ed.), *The Hub of the Highlands: The Book of Inverness and District* (Edinburgh, 1975), 106. John Higgitt anticipated a monastic scriptorium: 'At Tarbat or somewhere very close by was an ecclesiastical centre with contacts that went beyond Pictland . . . This centre was capable of producing books': J. Higgitt, 'The Pictish Latin inscription at Tarbat in Ross-shire', *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scotland*, 112 (1982), 300–21. All these judgements are strongly endorsed by the present campaign (see below).

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FIG. 1

(a) Aerial photograph of Portmahomack on the Tarbat peninsula, looking west, taken by Barri Jones and Ian Keillar in 1984. St Colman's Church is the white building to the left of the picture. (b) St Colman's church from the air looking north towards the Dornoch Firth, showing the cropmark of the surrounding ditch which is thought to have formed the monastic enclosure. *Ian Keillar and Barri Jones 1984.* (c) Tarbat Old Church, otherwise St Colman's church Portmahomack. It became redundant in the early 20th century, was bought by Tarbat Historic Trust in 1980 for £1 and was restored and re-opened as a museum and Visitor Centre in 1999. (d) Excavations inside the nave of St Colman's Church in 1997, looking east. *All copyright University of York.*

FIG. 2

(a) General view of excavations in the workshop area, looking south-east. (b) Evidence for metal-working. Top row: a cupellation tray and three moulds; bottom row: two whetstones, a possible touchstone and three crucibles. (c) Objects associated with the manufacture of leather, and possibly vellum. Top: two needles and a crescent-shaped knife; bottom: three pumice rubbers with suspension holes. (d) Rows of cattle metapodials set vertically into the ground. These are interpreted as the pegs from a vanished wooden stretcher for preparing vellum. *All copyright University of York.*

erased from the communal memory. This interim report is designed to present the discoveries made so far, assess their significance and highlight some of the problems that remain to be solved. It is hoped that this preliminary account may alert the interest and invite the advice of early medieval historians and archaeologists while the excavations are still in progress and can be seen at first hand.

The Tarbat peninsula (Fig. 3) lies in the heart of northern Pictland, between known centres at Burghead to the south-east and the Golspie strip to the north-west, both areas having a rich assemblage of Class I Pictish sculpture.[3] Class I stones are conspicuously absent from the peninsula itself, which is renowned rather for three outstanding Class II monuments originally situated at Hilton of Cadboll, Shandwick and Nigg. The village of Portmahomack developed next to a sheltered sandy beach which offers one of the best landing-places in the Moray Firth region (Fig. 1a).[4] The peninsula itself may have once been more nearly an island, and must have featured a lost portage route across its neck which gave rise to the placename Tarbat.[5] On a rise above the present village stands Tarbat Old Church, dedicated to St Colman, an 18th-century structure which has proved to conceal a medieval predecessor (Fig. 1c).

During the 19th and 20th centuries gravediggers and antiquaries unearthed several fragments of Early-medieval sculpture from St Colman's churchyard and environs.[6] A piece extracted from the garden wall of the manse (Fig. 4a) proved to be a highly significant discovery, in that it carried a Latin inscription in Insular majuscules — an indication of a possible monastic presence.[7] In 1984, during an aerial survey of Moray by Ian Keillar and Barri Jones, a cropmark was recorded which took the form of a wide ditch enclosing the church against the sea, in a manner reminiscent of that known at Iona (Fig. 1b). A sample of organic material taken from this ditch during a trial excavation by Jill Harden in 1991 gave three radiocarbon dates spanning the 2nd to the 6th centuries A.D.[8]

EVALUATION AND DESIGN

The present campaign was launched from the platform of these findings with the impetus of Tarbat Historic Trust, a local body anxious to restore and revive the

[3] I. H. Henderson, 'The origin centre of the Pictish symbol stones', *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scotland*, 91 (1958), 44–60; J. Close-Brooks, *Pictish Stones in Dunrobin Castle Museum* (Derby, 1989).

[4] W. J. Watson, *Place Names of Ross and Cromarty* (Repr. Evanton, 1996), 46. Portmahomack means 'Port of Colman', but can also be read as 'Port of Columba': see below, note 43.

[5] Ibid., 45. The word for portage appears in Gaelic-speaking Scotland with various spellings, such as Tarbert or Tairbert.

[6] Charles Cordiner, *Antiquities and Scenery of the North of Scotland, in a Series of Letters to Thomas Pennant* (London and Edinburgh, 1780), 66–7. John Stuart, *Sculptured Stones of Scotland* (Aberdeen, 1856), I, 11; II, pls. xxx and xxxvi. J. Romilly Allen and J. Anderson, *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1903), III: 73–5 and 88–95. A full catalogue of the sculpture is to appear in Martin Carver (ed.), *The Pictish Monastery at Portmahomack, Easter Ross. Volume 1: Studies of St. Colman's Church, its Burial Ground and Memorials, c550–1950.* A provisional catalogue of sculpture found up to 1997 can be found in *Bulletin*, 4 (op. cit. in note 1). The prefix TR denotes that a piece belongs to the Tarbat group with a provenance at the Portmahomack site.

[7] Higgitt, op. cit. in note 2; idem, 'The display script of the Book of Kells and the tradition of insular decorative capitals', 209–33 in F. O'Mahony (ed.), *The Book of Kells: Proceedings of a Conference at Trinity College Dublin* (Aldershot, 1994).

[8] J. Harden, 'A potential archaeological context for the early Christian sculptured stones from Tarbat, Easter Ross', 221–6 in C. Bourke (ed.), *From the Isles of the North: Early Medieval Art in Ireland and Britain* (Belfast, 1995), 226.
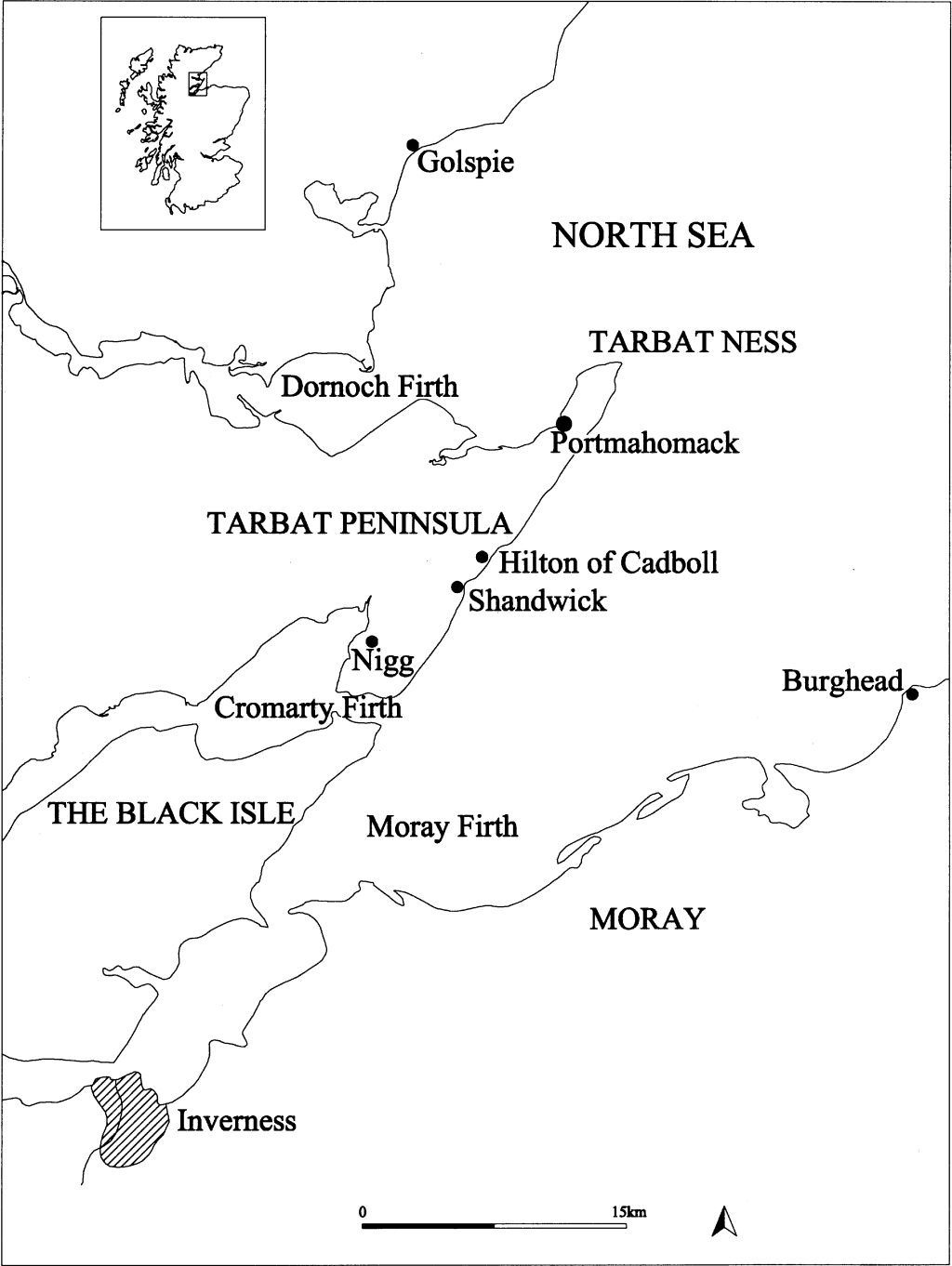
The Tarbat peninsula, showing the location of Portmahomack, Hilton of Cadboll, Nigg and Shandwick. Inset: Location of the Tarbat peninsula in Scotland. *Copyright University of York.*

FIG. 4

(a) Fragment of inscribed stone discovered in the garden wall of the Manse at Portmahomack and taken to Invergordon Castle before 1903. The inscription reads 'In nomine Jesus Christi [IHS XRI] crux Christi [XRI] in commemoratione Reo..Lii..die . . .hac.' It is realised in relief and executed in insular majuscules. It commemorates an individual whose name begins Reo. . . and was originally part of a cross, thought to represented by TR20 (see Fig. 10). *Crown Copyright RCAHMS* (TR 10; Displayed in the National Museums of Scotland (IB286). (b) Lower part of a cross-slab with tenon, featuring a plant scroll, and an unidentified scene, with Pictish symbols on the side. *Drawing by Ian G. Scott* (TR1; displayed in the National Museums of Scotland (IB190).

then redundant church of St Colman. In 1994, at the Trust's invitation, the University of York undertook an evaluation which led to the design of a new project.[9] The cropmark enclosure was first divided into zones and examined by remote sensing, supplemented by three test excavations. The knowledge of local farmers also proved particularly valuable: Duncan Johnson, a neighbouring resident who had ploughed the site for many years, was able to point to the likely site of buildings, suggested to him by the presence of beach cobbles in the plough soil which otherwise lay on a subsoil of pure sand. Although the evaluation confirmed that there were traces of settlement within the enclosure, it nevertheless failed to map the deep deposit underlying the central part of the Glebe Field, where a stream, a dam and a mill-pond lay buried beneath a metre or more of accumulated plough-soil.

The consequent project design was a composite affair, integrating a programme of research both at Portmahomack and on the Tarbat peninsula ('The Tarbat Discovery Programme') with the restoration of the church and its development as a museum and visitor centre ('The Tarbat Discovery Centre'). As

[9] Published in *Bulletin*, 1 (1995).

such it won support from investors interested in research, social amenity and local enterprise (see Acknowledgements), and this in turn allowed the research project to proceed at the large scale required by the inquiry. Areas for excavation were available within the church, which was to be developed as a display centre, and in the fields which surrounded the church to its south and west. Access to deposits in the churchyard was limited in accordance with respect for the concerns of the descendant community.

The objectives for excavation were to examine the ritual, social and economic aspects of the purported settlement. The site was not initially assumed to be a monastery, nor did we assume we knew what an early monastery was. The main problem in examining known Early-medieval monastic sites in Britain has been that, largely in the interests of conservation, they have been examined on a small scale, so revealing little of that internal layout which offers a key to the organisation and economy of the monastic community. Trenches are notoriously ineffective in understanding Early-medieval sites in Britain, or even for evaluating them.[10] Geophysical and other instruments have difficulty in mapping subterranean buildings, owing to the uneven depth of burial and the shallow and discontinuous character of the walls, and more difficulty still in determining which anomalies may belong to a contemporary system. Even in Ireland, where early monasteries are better known and better preserved, knowledge of layout has often depended on surface indications in sites assumed to be short-lived.[11] The key elements of an early monastery may be spread over a considerable area. A surviving church may very likely mark the site of earlier ritual activity, but the industrial and agricultural motor of the settlement may lie elsewhere. This was demonstrated by Chris Lowe in rescue excavations at Hoddom (Dumfries and Galloway) where industrial and agricultural activities were brought to light at some distance from the church, near the enclosure boundary.[12]

With these factors in mind, a continuous excavation area of 0.6 ha was designed, T-shaped in plan, stretching from the churchyard to the southern run of the enclosure ditch (Fig. 5). The excavation began in 1995 and has proceeded in four phases: first, the whole of the sample area in the fields beyond the church (Sectors 1 and 2) was opened by the technique of 'strip-and-map'.[13] Second, the interior of the church was excavated in advance of its refurbishment as a display centre (Sector 4). Third, there was a pre-emptive excavation of a house-plot beyond the church road (Sector 3). The stripping of sectors 1 and 2 having provided the basic geography of the interior, the fourth phase of operations has been to make detailed studies of the activity-areas it has revealed (Fig. 5). These

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[10] Cf. the relentless trenching of Iona: J. O'Sullivan, 'Iona: archaeological investigations 1875–1996, 215–43 in Davit Braun and Thomas Clancy (eds.), *Spes Scottorum: Hope of Scots. Saint Columba, Iona and Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1999), 235.

[11] M. Herity, *Studies in the Layout, Buildings and Art in Stone of Early Irish Monasteries* (London, 1995), i–vii.

[12] C. Lowe, 'New light on the Anglian minster at Hoddom', *Trans. Dumfries Galloway Nat. Hist. Antiq. Soc.*, 46 (1991), 11–35.

[13] 'Strip-and-map' consists of removing the plough soil and cleaning and recording the surface exposed. It is a useful non-destructive technique in the evaluation stage of field research. At Portmahomack, the sample area was opened in modules of 4 × 8 m, sealed in plastic and reburied ('strip-map-and-wrap'). Areas were subsequently re-opened for detailed study.
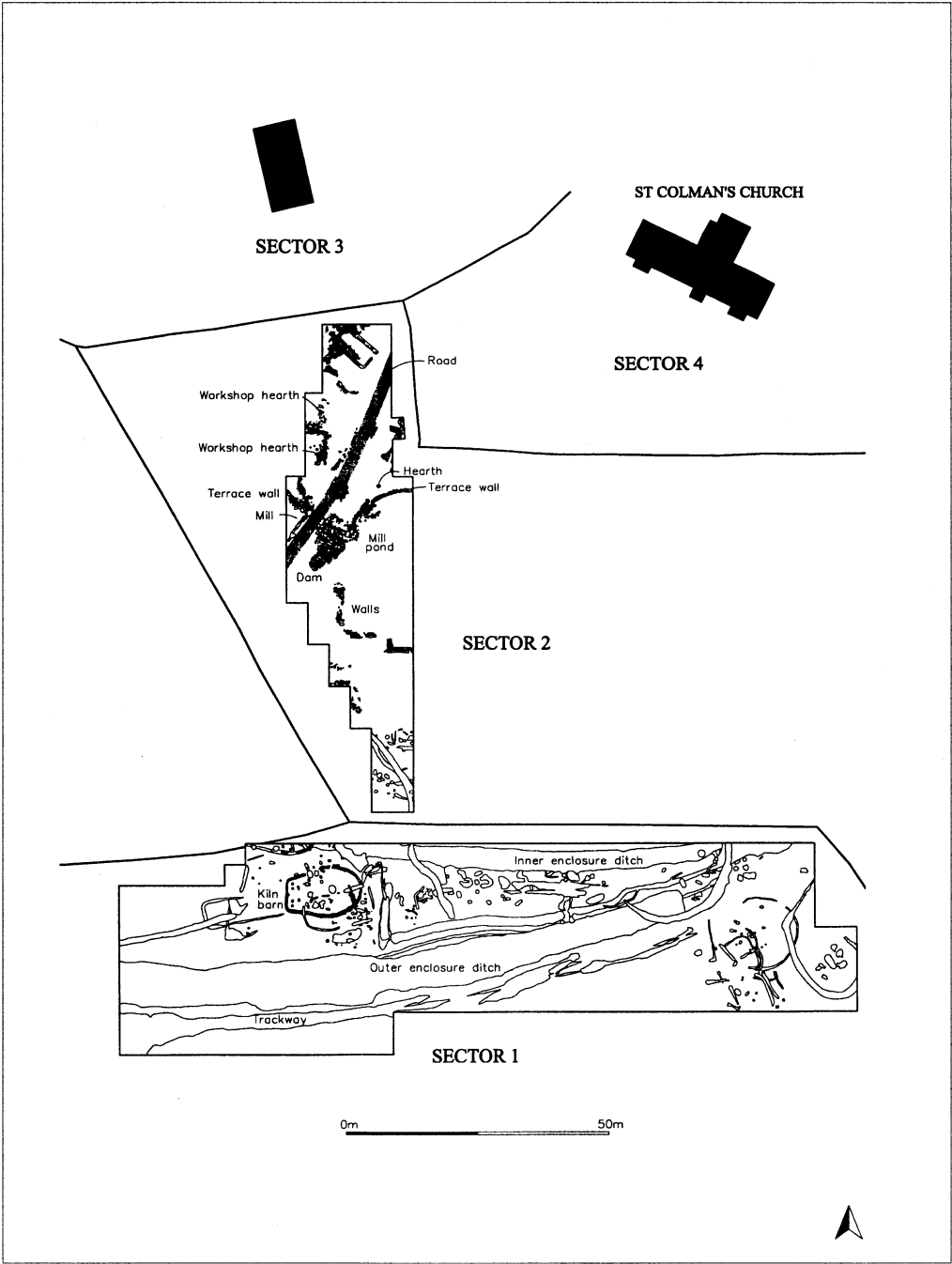
FIG. 5
The excavation area, showing the geography of the settlement as known in 2003. *Copyright University of York.*

areas may be summarised as *workshops* next to the church, a *mill-pond* to the south of them and, south of that, an *agricultural area* bounded by the *enclosure ditch*. All these investigations are now complete apart from the excavation of the earliest (6th- to 7th-century) phases of the workshops, which continues at the time of writing (September 2003).

The survey was designed to provide a context for the settlement revealed by excavation. Initially the whole Moray Firth area was proposed as the theatre of operations,[14] but the focus has since shifted to the Tarbat peninsula, and to the sites of Shandwick, Nigg and Hilton of Cadboll in particular, since each of these places features a monumental cross-slab which relates directly to Portmahomack in style, date and grandeur (Figs. 15 and 16). Following an initiative by the late Jane Durham to erect a replica of the Hilton of Cadboll cross-slab (the original being displayed in the National Museum of Scotland), the York team carried out an evaluation of the site of St Mary's Chapel, Hilton. A medieval village, known as Cadbol Fisher, was defined around the chapel, but the location and character of any settlement of the Pictish period there remains uncertain.[15] The survey programme continues, its targets being the definition of the early form of the peninsula, the likely portage route, the function of the sites of Hilton, Shandwick and Nigg, and the nature of their association with the monastic site at Portmahomack (see below).

THE CHURCH AND ITS BURIAL GROUND

The refurbishment of St Colman's church provided an opportunity not only to excavate extensively within the building (Fig. 1d) but also to record all its fabric stripped of harling.[16] This work offered a sequence of churches on the same spot (Fig. 6). The east wall of the crypt, which was on a different alignment to the other walls and contained a simple aumbry, is thought to represent the relic of a stone church of the 8th century (Church 1). A rectangular cell with a south doorway (Church 2) appears to have stood alone, before a chancel was added at its east end to make what is interpreted as a parish church of the 11th–12th century (Church 3). This building was extended at both ends in the 13th century (to form Church 4), with a crypt at the east end (incorporating the earlier 8th-century church). At the Reformation, here around 1560, the axis of worship was rotated through 90 degrees and a north aisle was added for the laird (Church 5). At this time, burial ceased within the church except for the families of the aristocracy and the minister, insofar as these were different. After a period of neglect, this church was rebuilt from its foundations in 1756 (Church 6) and again modified with a two-storey

[14] *Bulletin*, 1, 4.
[15] M. O. H. Carver, *Hilton of Cadboll: An Archaeological Assessment and Project Design* (York, 1998), a report commissioned through Jane Durham by Tain and Easter Ross Civic Trust. Exploratory trenches were subsequently dug through the west end of the chapel by Historic Scotland, as a result of which the original base and collar-stone and numerous small fragments from the Hilton cross-slab were recovered (S. Foster and H. James, pers. comm.). This confirmed the position of the cross-slab before 1676, when it was re-used as a recumbent slab and the cross-side erased to take an incised dedication to Alexander Duff and his three wives.
[16] Records made by Fred Geddes of Inverness, the project architect, and Annette Roe of Field Archaeology Specialists Ltd. York.

Phase 1 burials consist of :

5 cist burials orientated SW-NE
3 cist burials orientated E-W
10 inhumations with stone head supports orientated E-W

NORTH
AISLE

Sculpture fragment
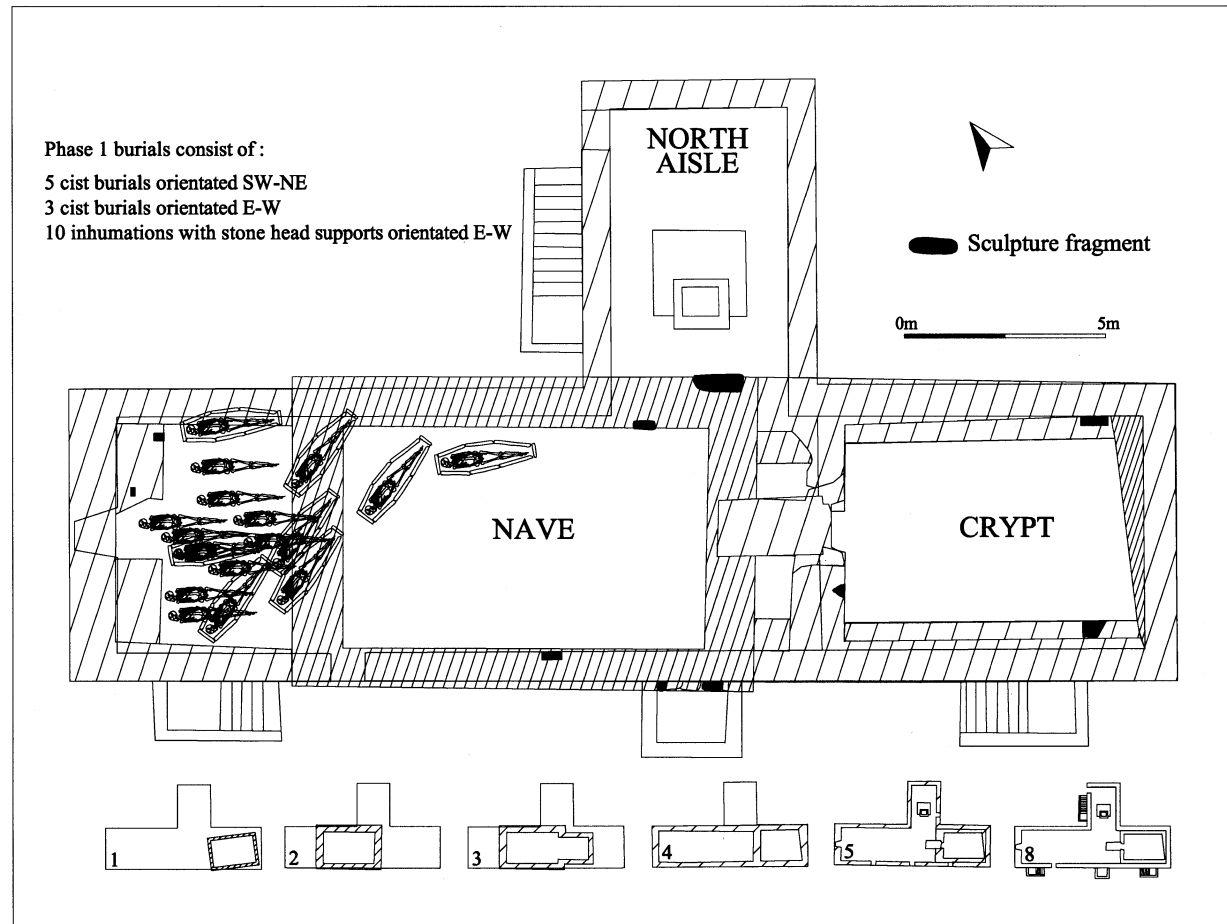
0m   5m

NAVE

CRYPT

1

2

3

4

5

8

FIG. 6

Plan of the excavations in the church showing walls of different periods, Phase 1 burials and locations of carved stones in situ. Inset: Six
of the eight phases of church building, shown diagrammatically. *Copyright University of York.*

north aisle in the late 18th century (Church 7). At the Disruption of 1843, the bulk of the congregation deserted St Colman's for the Free Church, which was erected nearer the beach. In St Colman's, now Tarbat Old Church, worship returned to its former E.–W. axis and the nave was furnished with box pews (Church 8).

The dating of this sequence has relied on stratification, radiocarbon dating, analogies with early structures elsewhere and equations made with the documentary record. The expectation is that very early churches in Scotland would be simple rectangular buildings, while a bicameral church would be more likely a construction of the 11th–12th century.[17] The aumbry in the surviving wall of the putative Church 1 may be a primary feature. In Ireland, Tomás Ó Carragáin's study of the Dingle and Iveragh peninsulas, showed that six out of nine aumbries occur in his Type 2 churches (early mortared), dating to the 8th–9th centuries.[18] A bell-pit which may be stratigraphically associated with the foundation of Church 2 contained fragments of clay mould, droplets of bronze and charcoal which was radiocarbon-dated to the 11th century (Tab. 1). The establishment of parishes and regulated monasteries was well under way in the hands of David I from about 1130. High investment in the church and the consequent elaboration of the architecture at Portmahomack (to produce Church 4) would be compatible with the re-foundation in 1227 of the Abbey at Fearn a few miles to the south.[19] The north aisle of Church 5 at Portmahomack had been constructed by 1623, the date inscribed on two cartouches set into its walls. For the 17th–20th centuries (Churches 6 to 8), the archaeological sequence could be closely aligned to documentary dates, and provides an illuminating chronicle of the changing relationships between the members of the community, their social classes, their minister and their God.[20]

The burials within the church divide into two principal phases, the earliest of which features long cist graves (Figs. 6 and 7a) and graves with one or two stones arranged around the head ('head-support' burials: Figs. 6 and 7b). Analysis by Sarah King has demonstrated that the majority of these Phase 1 graves are those of middle-aged or elderly men and the earliest has been radiocarbon-dated to around A.D. 560 (Fig. 8; Tab. 1). Burials of this phase were cut by the west wall of the 11th- to 12th-century church (Church 2; see Fig. 6), and this probably marks their temporal limit. The second phase of burials shows a distribution of men, women and children that is demographically more normal (Fig. 8) and the burial rites, which are without stone settings, include the use of shrouds and coffins. The date-range of this latter group would appear to be from around A.D. 1100 (the building

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[17] David MacGibbon and Thomas Ross, *The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland. From the Earliest Christian Times to the Seventeenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1896), 9. The majority of pre-Romanesque churches in Ireland appear to be designed as single-room rectangular buildings: M. Hare and A. Hamlin, 'The study of early church architecture in Ireland: an Anglo-Saxon viewpoint', 131–45 in L. A. S. Butler and R. K. Morris (eds.), *The Anglo-Saxon Church: Papers on History, Architecture and Archaeology in Honour of Dr H. Taylor* (CBA Res. Rep. 60, London, 1986), 134; Tomás Ó Carragáin, Pre-Romanesque Churches in Ireland: Interpreting Archaeological Regionalisms (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, University of Cork, 2002), 80.

[18] Op. cit. in note 17, 74.

[19] Alexander Fraser and Finlay Munro, *Tarbat Easter Ross: A Historical Sketch* (Evanton, 1988); R. G. Cant, 'The medieval church in the north: contrasting influences in the dioceses of Ross and Caithness', 47–58 in J. R. Baldwin (ed.), *Firthlands of Ross and Sutherland* (Edinburgh, 1986).

[20] Chronicled for St Colman's from documentary, architectural and archaeological evidence by Fred Geddes, Annette Roe, Martin Jones and the author. For an interim report see *Bulletin*, 3 (1997).

FIG. 7
(a) Early-medieval 'cist grave' at the west end of St Colman's church; (b) 'Head support burial' at the west end of St Colman's church. *Copyright University of York.*

TABLE 1

RADIOCARBON DATES FROM PORTMAHOMACK [CALIBRATED]

| Context	Lab. ref.	Date
Burnt wood from destruction layer over workshops. (Int 26/1030)	OxA-9664	400 (68.2%) 540 A.D. **Late 5th century**
Skeleton from one of the earliest long cist graves in the church (Int 20/F152/1373)	OxA-9699	535 (65.8%) 605 A.D. **Late 6th century**
Wooden stake *in situ* in the side of the outer enclosure ditch in Sector 1 (Int 11/F158/1490)	OxA-10159	690 (68.2%) 780 A.D. **Early 8th century**
Charcoal from the ultimate backfilling of an inner enclosure ditch in Sector 1 (Int 11/F18/1143)	OxA-9662	890 (68.2%) 985 A.D. **Early 10th century**
Skeleton with head wound from cemetery in the church (Int 20/F138/1238)	GU-9296	733 (1 sigma) 886 A.D. **8/9th century**
Skeleton with head wound from cemetery in the church (Int 20/F132/1307)	GU-9297	890 (1 sigma) 981 A.D. **9/10th century**
Charcoal from bell-casting pit (20/F107/1220)	OxA-10536	1060 (1 sigma) 1090 A.D. **Late 11th century**
Skeleton with head wound from burials post-dating Church 2 (Int 20/F93/1222)	GU-9298	1189 (1 sigma) 1258 A.D. **Early 13th century**

Age and sex distribution (Phase 2) (after King)
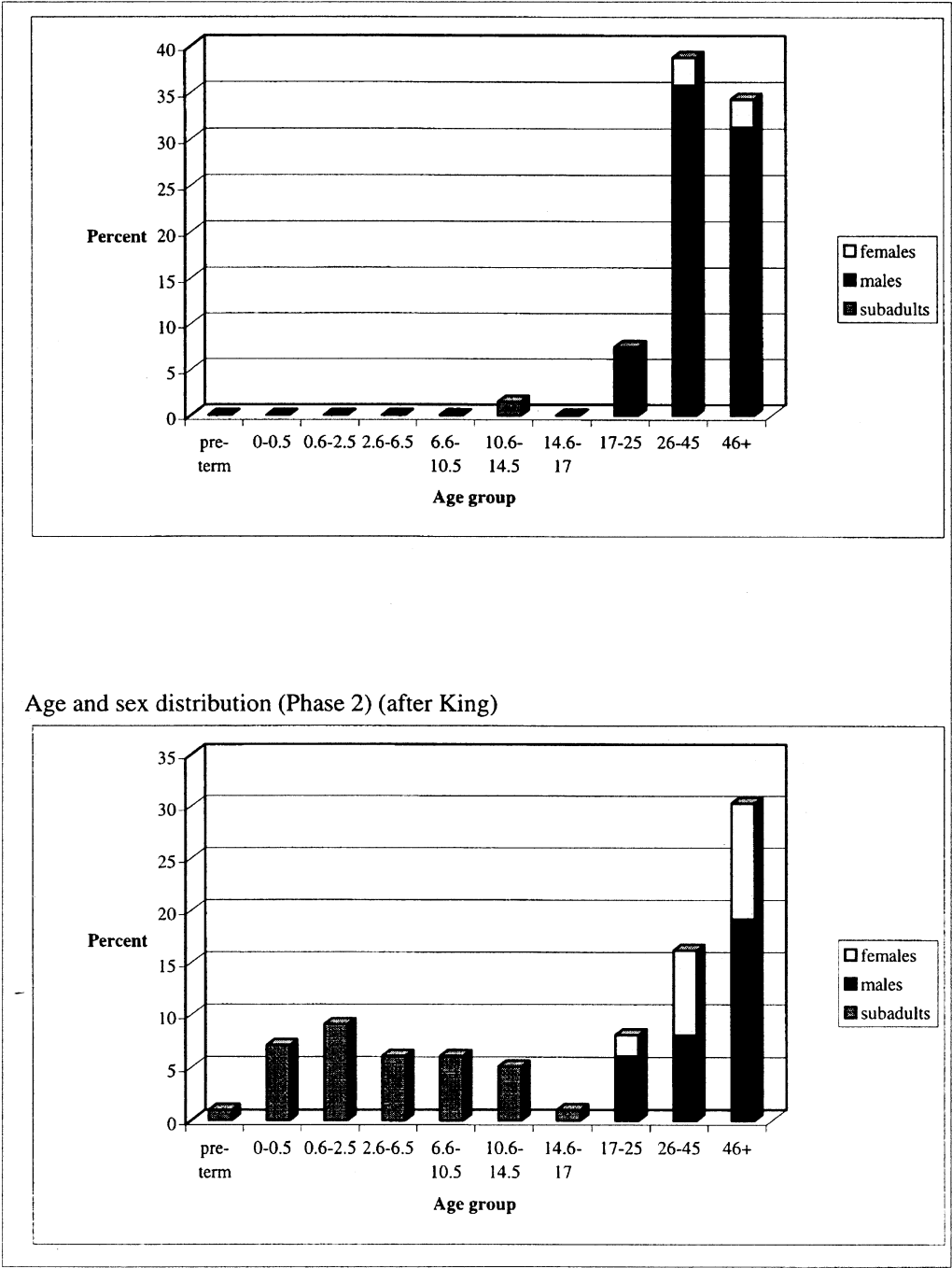
FIG. 8

Diagram showing the sex- and age-range of burials of Phase 1 (Early-medieval) and Phase 2 (High-medieval) (after Sarah King).

of Church 2) to the 16th century (the Reformation), after which burial within the nave was discouraged.

SCULPTURE

In addition to the valuable sequences of church-buildings and burials, there was a third reward of digging in the church: the discovery of a large number of pieces of Early-medieval sculpture. These may be associated with the graves of the first phase of burial, since some pieces had been incorporated in the foundations of Church 2 (Fig. 6). Together with the nineteen fragments recorded before 1994, and the material found in the disused workshops in the Glebe Field (see below), the number of carved stone pieces (of the size of a hand and larger) from Portmahomack now exceeds 150. They may be classified as belonging to three main groups: (1) small flat slabs bearing crosses incised or in relief, which are seen as grave-markers (2) slabs and blocks featuring frieze decoration and possibly deriving from architectural masonry and (3) pieces belonging to monumental cross-slabs executed in relief and erected to stand vertically with four sides visible. The grave-markers include crosses of different types, many of them having a close affinity to examples known from Iona (Fig. 9).[21] The architectural pieces include a panel featuring a family of cattle, possibly functioning as part of a shrine or *cancellum* (TR28: Fig. 11), a vertical slotted post which may relate to a similar structure (TR27: Fig. 9) and a massive block with a lion and boar in relief on its side, and a cross at one end (TR22), provisionally interpreted as part of a string-course, a sarcophagus lid or an altar.

At least three monumental cross-slabs once stood at Portmahomack. One survives as a base decorated with an inhabited plant-scroll and carrying Pictish symbols along one edge (TR1: Fig. 2b). A second, proposed in the 19th century as a 'Danish Cross', features panels of interlace and snake-headed scrolls (TR2).[22] A third cross-slab is represented by a large block of carved stone recovered from the east vault of the 18th-century church in 1997 (TR20: Fig. 10).[23] It carries on one side a composite beast and the elements of a cross with panels of spiral ornament (Fig. 10a), and on the other a group of clerics bearing books surmounted by the figure of a bear and two confronted lions, lording it over the half carcase of a deer (Fig. 10b). The clerics have been identified as apostles,[24] and the idea that there should therefore be twelve or thirteen figures in the row has informed Elizabeth Hooper's reconstruction (Fig. 10d). An observation by Joanna Close-Brooks has associated this monumental cross-slab with the previously discovered Latin inscription, which features the same spiroform terminal and refers to a cross of Christ (TR10: Figs. 2a and 10c).

The ornament and iconography of the Portmahomack cross-slabs shows them to be work of around A.D. 800 and closely related to the Book of Kells as well as to

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[21] See Ian Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh, 2001), esp. 28–35.
[22] Allen and Anderson, op. cit. in note 6, III, 88.
[23] Discovered by Niall Robertson. Mortar and clay on the stone showed it had been employed in the foundations of the 11th-century church (Church 2) and then in the 17th-century vault of the crypt.
[24] The hairstyle of the figure second from the right suggests the apostle Andrew (Richard Bailey, pers. comm.).

TARBAT: TR21   IONA   EILEAN NAOIMH   GOVAN

TARBAT: TR19   IONA: Cruciform stones

TARBAT: TR33   IONA   IONA

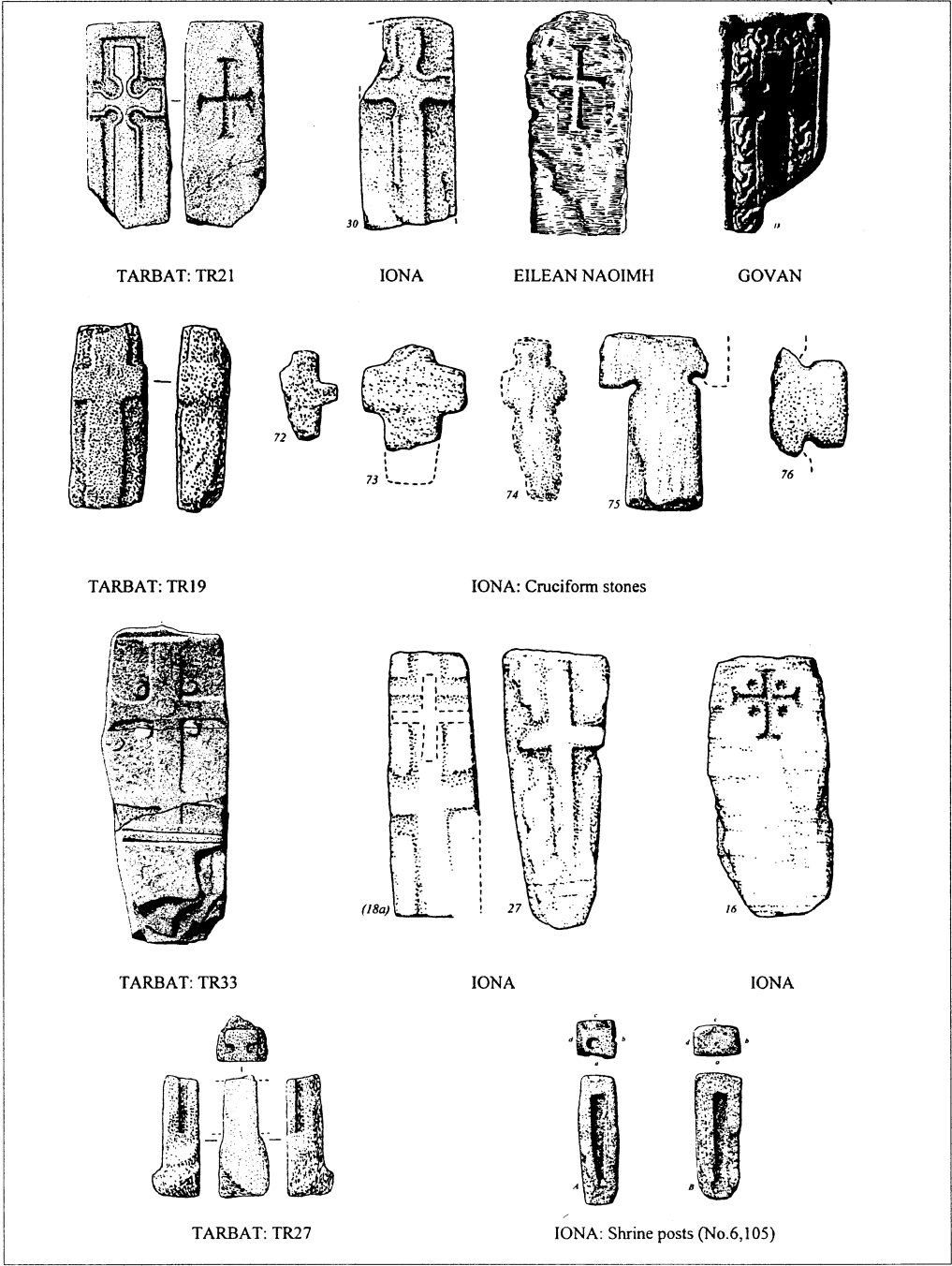TARBAT: TR27   IONA: Shrine posts (No.6,105)

FIG. 9

Grave markers from Portmahomack, with comparable examples from Iona and other sites in western Scotland.
The Portmahomack grave markers are on display at the Tarbat Discovery Centre (*Bulletin*, 3 (1997), 18).

the neighbouring monuments erected at Nigg, Shandwick and Hilton of Cadboll. The figurative sculpture at all four sites is the subject of a current study by Kellie Meyer, and, even if all the iconography cannot be readily interpreted, the initial findings show that the Tarbat carvers had a highly sophisticated understanding of homiletic and Patristic literature. Whereas scenes such as the hunt on Hilton of Cadboll, or the David motifs on Nigg may imply the advertisement of aristocratic interests, other themes, such as St Paul and St Anthony meeting in the desert (Nigg), a possible Daniel (Portmahomack, TR1), the apostles (Portmahomack, TR20) and Cherubim and Seraphim (Shandwick) show a strong and well-informed promotion of the ecclesiastical and the monastic project.[25] It can also be noted that Pictish symbols occur on monuments at all four sites, and that while most are emblazoned on the reverse face to the cross, those at Portmahomack TR1 are on the edge of the stone, in a position analogous to the Latin inscription carried on another cross-slab from the same site, TR10/20. This reinforces the view that the Pictish symbols represent names.[26] The Tarbat sculpture allows us to imagine a community in which the secular and the religious were closely integrated, and where leading roles were being taken by individuals with Pictish names in the Moray Firth area on the eve of the 9th century.

THE WORKSHOPS

If the church and burial ground provide the liturgical centre for the settlement, its industrial and agricultural motor has been revealed in excavations in the Glebe Field and further south (Fig. 5). Immediately west of the churchyard (at the north end of Sector 2), a dense and complex pattern of rubble foundations has been defined which is attributed to former workshops. The area was crossed by a once-paved road with stone-lined drains either side running downhill in a south-westerly direction. On either side of this road, the workshop structures are indicated by ribbons of slabby red sandstone and patches of pebbles (Fig. 2a). The roughly square spaces defined by these linear features contain sequences of dark strata interleaved with bright yellow sand, as though periodically renewed. Some contain hearths which may be round (clay-lined) or rectangular (bordered by upright slabs).

The dark strata have produced numerous objects which imply manufacturing and allow them to be grouped under the rubric 'workshops'. Metal-working is signalled by crucibles, of bowl and triangular type, moulds, including some for producing artefacts marked with a cross, a shallow dish which implies cupellation (separation of precious metal) and a number of whetstones for finishing castings, one of which may be a touchstone for gold assay (Fig. 2b). Among the scraps of metal is a glass stud inlaid with wire and enamel, such as is found on the Derrynaflan patten.[27] Glass-working is implied by lumps, droplets and moulds for
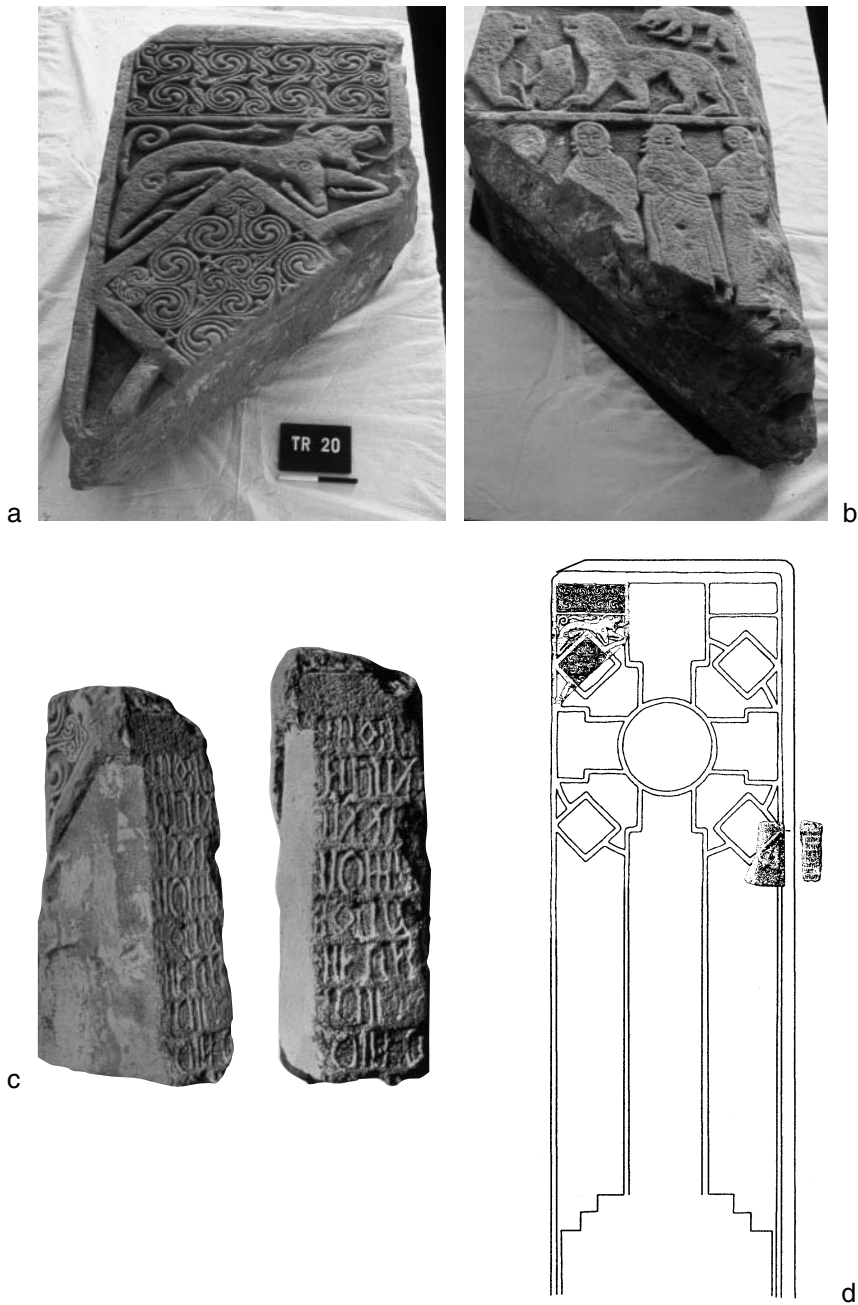
FIG. 10

The 'apostle' stone, removed from the south wall of the crypt (TR20). Traces of mortar showed that the block had at one time been incorporated in Church 2. (a) [front]: The composite beast and part of the cross. (b) [back]: Four apostles, a bear and two lions with the half-carcase of a deer. (c) [side] Side view of the inscribed stone (TR10) seen in Figure 4a, showing the scroll ornament. (d) Elizabeth Hooper's reconstruction of the cross-slab, showing the likely position of the inscribed stone (TR10). TR 20 is displayed at the Tarbat Discovery Centre. *(a), (b) and (d) copyright University of York; (c) Crown copyright RCAHMS.*
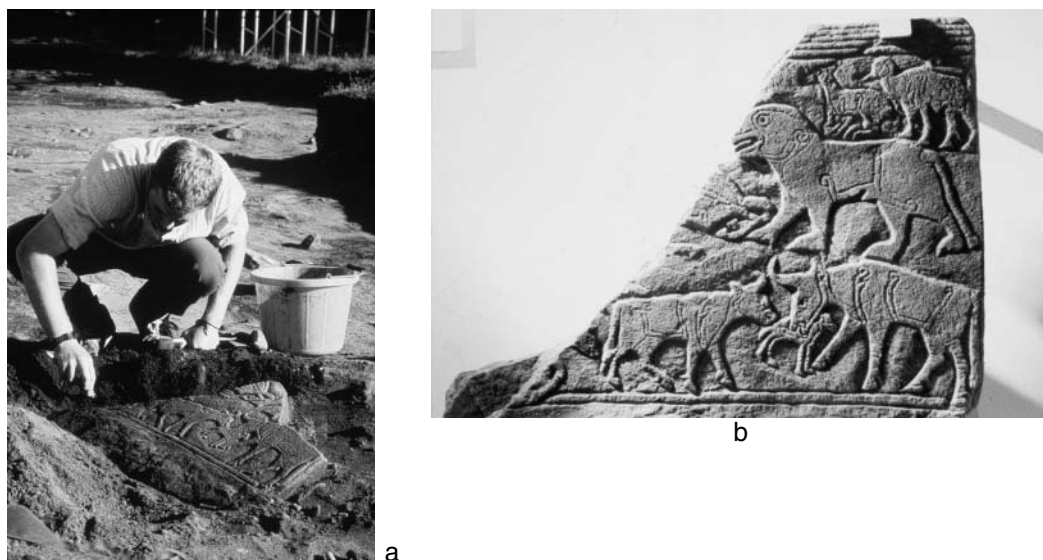
FIG. 11

The 'calf' stone, excavated in the Glebe Field (Sector 2). (a) The 'calf stone' in the course of discovery in 1998. The slab had been broken up sometime after A.D. 800 and re-used to line and cover a culvert. (b) The restored panel showing a family of cattle and composite beasts carved on a slab of local Old Red Sandstone, perhaps originally part of a *cancellum* (vertical barrier between the nave and the chancel). TR28/35: on display at the Tarbat Discovery Centre. *Copyright University of York.*

escutcheons, resembling closely some known from Iona.[28] A long metallic lump has proved on examination by x-ray to have been a chisel covered in follicles of ferrified wood resembling wood-shavings, suggesting wood-working and the use of a lathe.

There is also evidence for leather-working which has been greatly illuminated by the researches of Cecily Spall, the Tarbat project finds researcher. Large amounts of animal bones leave no doubt that cattle and sheep were being husbanded and processed at the settlement. In the workshop area, a lined tank with a culvert suggests a tanning pit, while a crescent-shaped knife and bone needles are objects likely to have been used for cutting finishing and stitching leather (Fig. 2c). Three conically shaped pieces of volcanic lava contain minute white fragments in their flat ends and have a hole at the other end for suspension. These would serve for smoothing and finishing a fine leather surface. Initially puzzling were rows of sharpened cattle metapodials pushed into the ground (Fig. 2d) and associated with small, round, white or red pebbles. These too may be associated with the treatment of fine leather: the metapodials are identified as the pegs surviving from a wooden frame for stretching leather. The pegs, turned to increase tension, are connected by thongs to the corners of the hide, wrapped round a pebble to prevent them from tearing. Tiny shells of sea creatures in hearths suggest seaweed ash, a useful additive to tanning if the leather product needs to be

[28] Anna Ritchie, *Iona* (Edinburgh, 1997), 42.

light in colour. If the Tarbat workshops can thus be argued to have been making fine, stretched, smoothed and whitened leather, then one possible product would be calf-skin with a surface prepared to take writing. Cumulatively, therefore, these indications allow us to suppose that the Portmahomack settlement might have been engaged in the manufacture of vellum.[29]

MILL AND FARM

At the south-eastern end of the workshop area the paved road crosses a bridge of massive slabs which forms part of a dam set across a buried stream running down a shallow valley (Figs. 5, 12 and 13). Soundings uphill (east) of this dam leave little doubt that it created a pond, and a gap through the dam wall provides a likely mill-race powered by the head of water. Five rotary querns or mill-stones have so far been recovered from the pond. An expected horizontal mill is likely to lie downstream to the west, outside our excavation area and probably under the modern road.[30] The silted-up mill-pond was laced with later drains cut by successive farmers trying to defeat the standing water locked in by the buried dam (Fig. 12). To the south the subsoil surface begins to climb again on to flatter, better-drained land beside the enclosure ditch. The topsoil here is shallow, and the subsoil marked with numerous post-holes, pits and runnels.

In this area, to the south of the Glebe Field (Sector 1 on Fig. 5), the earliest features are thin lines of ard-ploughing running NE.–SW., distinctive from the stratigraphically later *rig* that is medieval in date and over-runs the backfilled enclosure ditch (Fig. 1b). Four major structures that probably or certainly belong to the Early Middle Ages have here been defined. The enclosure ditch itself proved to have followed two main routes: an inner enclosure ditch and an outer enclosure ditch (the later of the two). The inner ditch had been backfilled with earth and sand, topped by a deposit rich in metal-working debris of the 8th to 9th centuries. The outer ditch, which was cut through the sand cap and into the boulder clay beneath, was lined with wattle-work. No certain traces of a bank or rampart have been discerned for either ditch. The location and character of the outer ditch leaves little doubt that its function was not defensive, but rather to collect water from the hill-slope to the south (a practice that actually continued here, with the use of rubble drains, into the 20th century).

Between the inner and outer ditches and aligned with them stood a large building which has been identified as kiln-barn (Fig. 14). It was bag-shaped in plan and featured six pairs of internal double-posts that supported the roof at the round east end and four groups of triple-posts at the square west end. On the north side was a porch, also supported by pairs of double-posts. There was a hearth at the centre of the round end, and a stone-lined flue led into the same area from the south. Analysis of the hearth-material has revealed traces of hammerscale from

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[29] Analogies may be drawn from the tools and equipment used to prepare modern vellum; see for example Christopher de Hamel, *Scribes and Illuminators* (London, 1992), 11–13.
[30] For a recent survey showing an example of the likely relation of ponds, leats and mill, see Colin Rynne, 'The early monastic watermill', 185–213 in Jenny White Marshall and Grellan D. Rourke, *High Island: An Irish Monastery in the Atlantic* (Dublin, 2000).

FIG. 12

Excavations in progress in Sector 2 in 2000, looking north. At the far end the workshop area, and in the centre the mill-pond, laced with later drains.
Copyright University of York.

FIG. 13
Massive stones forming the dam of the mill-pond. Looking north-east. *Copyright University of York.*

smithing. The structural posts were originally of squared timber and had been packed with sandstone slabs, all cloven from the same block. The wall-lines were founded on a layer of beach-cobbles laid in a trench and the walls are likely to have been carried up in turf.[31] This large and architecturally competent building is interpreted as a kiln-barn of a type known in the Western Isles until the 19th century.[32] The flue and the clusters of posts imply an upper floor, perhaps for the laying out, drying and malting of barley, while the hammerscale implies a summer usage as a forge.

DATING

An intensive programme of radiocarbon dating is intended for the site as a whole. Preliminary dates (see Tab. 1) have so far been obtained for three Phase 1 burials (6th, and 9th to 10th centuries), the outer enclosure ditch (8th century), charcoal from ditch back-fill (10th century) and a bell-pit associated with Church 2 (11th century). These preliminary results seem to justify an assumption that the site as a whole will be found to begin in the later 6th century, and that the outer enclosure ditch was in use by the early 8th century. An inner ditch, which may

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[31] The interpretations drawn from the excavation and study of this structure are owed largely to Cecily Spall.
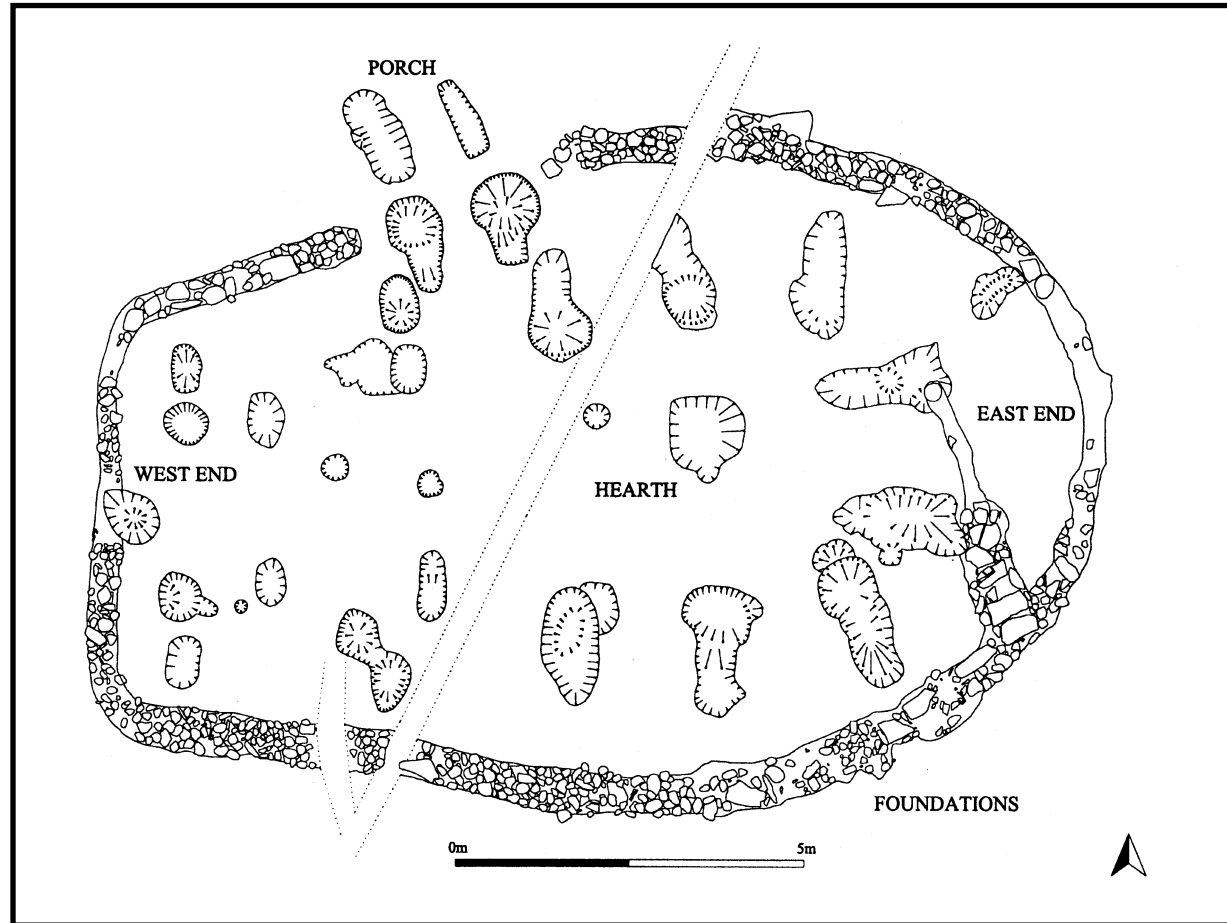[32] A. Fenton, *Scottish Country Life* (repr. East Linton, 1999), 100.

FIG. 14

Plan of a building (S1) with post-pits and a foundation trench filled with beach cobbles. It is provisionally interpreted as a kiln-barn, which also functioned as a smithy. *Copyright University of York.*

have been earlier, was still visible as a shallow depression that acquired glass debris and charcoal with a radiocarbon date in the early 10th century. The end-date of the Pictish monastic settlement is difficult to determine, but must have lain between the 8th century (the date of the sculpture) and the 11th century (the likely date of Church 2).[33]

The sculpture is assigned on art historical grounds to the 6th to 8th centuries A.D., with the majority of the figurative carving and the cross-slabs placed around A.D. 800. All the ornament is very closely parallelled on the other monumental stones on the Tarbat peninsula. Pictish symbols are prominently displayed on the Nigg, Shandwick and Hilton monuments and on TR1, so that although the Tarbat culture is Christian and new to the area, it is not wholly imported from either the west or the south. The assemblage from the workshop area is comparable to material found at Whithorn, Birsay and Iona, but has no moulds for brooches such as are found at Dunadd or Mote of Mark.[34] A porcupine *sceatt* from the workshop area dated to around A.D. 715 originates from the Rhine-mouth and is the northernmost specimen of its type so far known.[35]

DISCUSSION

There are several indications that between the 6th century and the 9th the settlement at Portmahomack was a monastery. The sculpture in general and the inscription in particular suggest a learned and literate community. The workshops indicate the manufacture of composite objects of an ecclesiastical nature, perhaps including vellum, and thus the making of manuscripts. The predominately male burials would conform to the idea of a monastic community, as was found at the contemporary documented monastic site on the Isle of May.[36] The D-shaped enclosure has also been regarded as diagnostic.[37] The settlement certainly has a strong economic basis, both agricultural and industrial, which, we can suggest, peaked in the 8th century.

An attractive context for the foundation of this establishment is provided by Columba's expedition up the Great Glen as recorded by his biographer Adomnán, writing in Iona, and the Venerable Bede, writing in Jarrow, both in the early 8th century. Columba founded the monastery at Iona in 563 and two years later made his sortie into north-eastern Pictland, passing by Loch Ness and meeting Bridei son

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[33] In an object lesson in the difficulties of selecting material for radiocarbon dating, samples of large pieces of wood were collected from the charcoal layer sealing 8th-century artefacts that covered much of the workshop area and had been attributed to a Viking raid. They gave a date in the early 5th century (Tab. 1). This is explained by the samples being of heartwood (thus less well burnt) that had died in the tree in the late 5th century, and been cut for building in the late 6th century. The timber could still have been burnt in the 9th century. New dates will be sought using sieved identified macro fauna and flora, which will have died at or near the date of the fire.

[34] P. Hill, *Whithorn and St Ninian: The Excavation of a Monastic Town 1984–91* (Stroud, 1997), 400; C. L. Curle, *The Pictish and Norse Finds from the Brough of Birsay 1934–74* (Edinburgh, 1982); Ritchie, op. cit. in note 28, 41–3; A. Lane and E. Campbell, *Dunadd: An Early Dalriadic Capital* (Oxford, 2000), 111–43; T. M. Dickinson, 'Fowler's type G penannular brooches reconsidered', *Medieval Archaeol.*, 26 (1982), 41–68 (Mote of Mark).

[35] Mark Blackburn, 'An eighth-century coin from the Glebe Field', *Bulletin*, 4 (1998),15–17.

[36] P. J. Yeoman, *Secrets of Fife's Holy Island: The Archaeology of the Isle of May* (Fife, nd.).

[37] E.g. A. C. Thomas, *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain* (Oxford, 1971); H. Mytum, *The Origins of Early Christian Ireland* (London, 1992), 80; Ian Fisher, 'The West of Scotland', 37–41 in J. Blair and C. Pyrah (eds.), *Church Archaeology: Research Directions for the Future* (CBA Res. Rep., 104, York, 1996).

of Mailchu, leader of the northern Picts, near Inverness.[38] Bede claims that Columba converted the northern Picts 'to the Faith of Christ by his preaching and example'. Adomnán does not claim as much, but reporting on the great plague which ravaged a large part of the world 'in our time' (i.e. the late 7th or early 8th century) mentions that it had spared the population of western and eastern Scotland through the grace of Columba, who had 'founded among both peoples the monasteries where today he is still honoured on both sides' — i.e. in Pictland and Scotland, both sides of Druim Alban.[39]

The problems of validating the existence of such monasteries, and even of a Pictish church have been considerable. Kathleen Hughes had initial difficulty in endorsing a Pictish engagement in Christian literature at all and Christopher Morris has justifiably questioned the monastic character of pre-Norse sites in Orkney.[40] But in his 1995 essay, Richard Sharpe felt able to state that 'little more than one hundred years after Columba's death dependencies of Iona formed a major part of the church in Pictland' and he also confronted scepticism about the Picts' ability to produce books.[41] The Portmahomack discoveries would seem to have vindicated this view. We can at least accept a literate Columban monasticism in Early-historic northern Scotland, and other centres surely await rediscovery.[42] Portmahomack (Port Mo-Cholmáig) is conventionally the Port of Colman, but Colmán is a common diminutive of Columba and the place can therefore also claim eligibility for an association with Columba himself.[43]

At a later date, important Christian influence would also be expected to have come from the south. Bede reports that in the early 8th century the Pictish king Nechtan consulted Ceolfrid, Abbot of Wearmouth/Jarrow, on the subject of the Northumbrian practice of Christianity, receiving in reply a letter of advice which might have been written by Bede himself.[44] Nechtan apparently reacted by promulgating the new procedures to his clerics, and, according to the Annals of Ulster, subsequently expelled churchmen of the Columban persuasion.[45] This documented ideological realignment has been widely seen as providing a context for the erection of Class II Pictish stones,[46] which, while they continue to carry Pictish symbols, also feature the cross. They also feature elements of sophisticated

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[38] B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (ed. and trans.), *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford, 1969), III.4 [hereafter *HE*]; Richard Sharpe (trans.), Adomnán of Iona, *Life of Columba* (Harmondsworth, 1995), I.33 and II.32 [hereafter *LC*].

[39] *LC*, II.46.

[40] K. Hughes, *Early Christianity in Pictland* (Jarrow Lecture, 1970); C. D. Morris, *Church and Monastery in the Far North: An Archaeological Evaluation* (Jarrow Lecture, 1989); idem, 'From Birsay to Tintagel: a personal view', 37–78 in B. E. Crawford (ed.), *Scotland in Dark Age Britain* (St Andrews, 1996).

[41] Ed. cit. in note 38, 33. See also Julian Brown, Isabel Henderson and John Higgitt, opp. cit. in note 2.

[42] For example Urquhart: Henderson, op. cit. in note 2, 99; Kinnedar: ibid., 106; Rosemarkie: eadem, *The Art and Function of Rosemarkie's Pictish Monuments* (Groam House Lecture, 1990); A. Macdonald, *Curadán, Boniface and the Early Church at Rosemarkie* (Groam House Lecture, 1992).

[43] Watson, op. cit. in note 4, 46; idem, *The History of the Celtic Placenames of Scotland* (repr. Edinburgh, 1993), 278; Kuno Meyer, *Life of Colmán Son of Lúachan* (repr. Felinfach, nd.), 109: 'the true origin of the name Colmán [is] a diminutive pet form of Columb, borrowed from Lat. columba'; Nollaig Ó Muraíle, 'The Columban onomastic legacy', 193–228 in Cormac Bourke (ed.), *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba* (Dublin, 1997), 195 and 218; T. Clancy, pers. comm.

[44] *HE*, V.21.

[45] Hughes, op. cit. in note 40, 15.

[46] S. Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots* (Edinburgh, 1996), 93.

Christian iconography and plant-scroll of a kind initially popular in Northumbria and becoming widespread in Insular art during the 8th century. The *sceatt* found at Portmahomack might be taken as an indication that traffic up the east coast was, by the early 8th century, adding to the monastery's range of contacts.

The end of the Portmahomack monastery is obscure. Over the workshop area a widespread layer of stratigraphically simultaneous burning was identified, containing lumps of burnt wood, nails and pieces of freshly fractured carved stone. This episode of deliberate destruction must have occurred between around 800, when the stone was carved, and around 1100 when similar pieces were built into the foundations of the church. The Vikings are the obvious, but not the inevitable, culprits. Earl Sigurd I of Orkney and a Viking from the Hebrides, Thorstein the Red, are said to have conquered the whole of Caithness and a large part of Argyll, Moray and Ross in the late 9th century. Sigurd found his final resting place by the River Oykell, a few miles due north-west of Portmahomack across the Dornoch Firth. The establishment of the Earldom of Orkney was followed by intermittent pressure on the Moray Firth area as the earls attempted to push open the route to other Scandinavian possessions at the far end of the Great Glen. In 1035 or thereabouts a battle was fought at Torfness (identifiable as Tarbat Ness) which resulted in victory for Thorfinn the Mighty against one 'Karl Hundason' (lit.: son of a dog), perhaps to be identified here as Macbeth. In the late 12th century Earl Harald unsuccessfully renewed the quest to open the Vikings' north-east passage.[47]

The fact that many pieces of 8th-century sculpture were incorporated into the foundations of the 11th-/12th-century church (Church 2) may be significant in another way. Scottish religious history permits us to imagine that Christian reformers might exhibit passion and violence towards earlier icons, while subsequently profiting from their pragmatic recycling. The breaking-up of sculpture and the burning of the settlement could then be seen as a consequence of early religious reform. However, the difference in wear between those fragments found in the workshop area (freshly broken) and those re-used in the church walls (worn), does encourage the view that the episode of destruction occurred nearer in date to the 9th century than the 11th, and the Vikings must currently remain the prime suspects.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Further archaeological work is needed to help understand the genesis and development of the monastery and its role on the Tarbat peninsula, in northern Pictland and in the formation of Scotland. Prehistoric occupation is thin, and it may be that the peninsula was little exploited until the 6th century. If so, it may

[47] A. O. Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History A.D. 500–1286* (Edinburgh, 1922), 377. Einar the Turfer is mentioned in *Orkneyingasaga*, ch. 7, s.a. 891x894: 'He was the first of men to find how to cut turf from the earth for fuel, in Torfness in Scotland'. Torfness is said to have been south of the Moray Firth (ibid., 577). Karl Hundason was defeated at sea off Deerness and routed off Torfness, south of Moray Firth (to the south of Oykell, according to Arnor, the Earl's poet: B. E. Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland* (Leicester, 1987), 72. See also eadem, 'The making of a frontier: the Firthlands from the ninth to the twelfth centuries', 33–46 in J. R. Baldwin (ed.), *Firthlands of Ross and Sutherland* (Edinburgh, 1986), at pp. 37–45; eadem, *Earl and Mormaer: Norse-Pictish Relationships in Northern Scotland* (Groam House Lecture, 1995), 5–6.

then have been a piece of marginal land in which the pre-Christian leaders had little interest and so was available to an incoming community. On the other hand, its assets, such as the beach and its maritime centrality, may have been already in active use before Columba's day. The 6th and 7th centuries will in any event have been crucial to the site's initial rationale and early development. Intact strata, potentially of this date, await excavation in the workshop area.

The context (and original location) of the monumental sculpture at Hilton of Cadboll, Shandwick and Nigg (Fig. 15) is still largely unknown, as is the intellectual, social and economic relationship of these sites to the monastery at Portmahomack. The four principal monuments were apparently constructed in stone brought from the same quarry. Their size and transportation, not to mention the carving, implies a major contemporary investment from a dominant power. All were composed by people with a profound grasp of international Christian thinking, which they were able to interweave with the particular attributes of their own society. The use of Pictish symbols suggests that the names of persons were being proclaimed, and with the Latin inscription providing a similar indication, we can infer that each of these monuments was dedicated to the memory of a specific individual. These enticing considerations still leave open the question of whether Hilton, Nigg and Shandwick functioned as separate secular properties, as separate monastic communities, as daughter-churches to Portmahomack, or as boundary-markers for a single monastic estate.

Much will depend on the early form of the peninsula and the relative visibility of the monuments. If the sea-level is slightly raised, the peninsula becomes more of an island (Fig. 16), and the route of the portage implied by the name Tarbat becomes self-evident, beginning in Inver Bay and passing by way of hill lochs (surviving as Loch Eye) to Nigg Bay in the south. The likely positions of the monuments then also become more significant in the landscape. Survey at Hilton suggested that, while the great cross-slab probably stood by the chapel of St Mary from at least the 12th century, when first erected 300 years earlier it may have stood on the hill, near an earlier 'Hilltown', like that at Shandwick. The cross-slabs at Portmahomack and Nigg were no doubt originally sited on promontories adjacent to their churches. It can thus be proposed that each of the four monuments looked out to sea: Portmahomack on to the Dornoch Firth, Shandwick and Hilton on to the Moray Firth and Nigg towards the Cromarty Firth (Fig. 16). The corollary is that travellers on the sea could likewise see one of them, and so be guided to a landing place and an official reception. In the sense that the Tarbat monuments functioned as a set, they may therefore be held to mark out a single monastic estate in the 8th century. Schemes of this kind at the same date have been suggested for the Dingle and Iveragh peninsulas and elsewhere in Ireland.[48] Iona remained active in the 9th century, when some of the eastern churches were reinvigorated by the Céli Dé,[49] and it may be that Portmahomack was subject to this programme too. During the formation of Alba, a unification of

[48] T. Ó Carragáin, 'A landscape converted: archaeology and early church organisation on Iveragh and Dingle, Ireland', 127–52 in Martin Carver (ed.), *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, A.D. 300–1300* (York, 2003); Herity, op. cit. in note 11, iii.
[49] Thomas Clancy, 'Iona, Scotland and the Céli Dé', 111–30 in Crawford (ed.), op. cit. in note 40.

FIG. 15

Pictish cross-slabs of the Tarbat peninsula. (a) Nigg (*courtesy of Kellie Meyer*); (b) Hilton of Cadboll (*courtesy of RCAHMS*); (c) Shandwick (*photo, Martin Carver*); (d) The Hilton replica with its sculptor, Barry Grove (*courtesy of Kellie Meyer*).
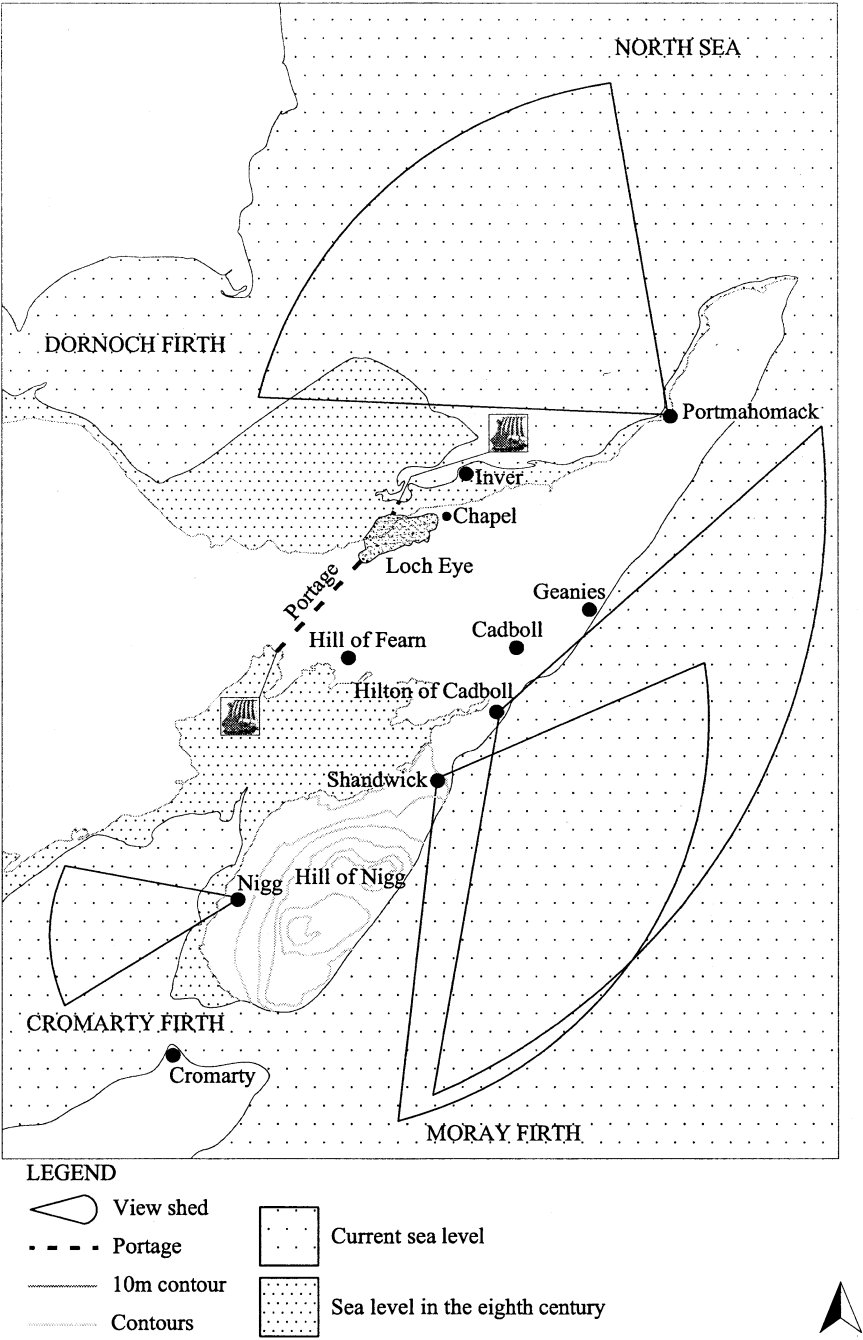
NORTH SEA

DORNOCH FIRTH

Portmahomack

Inver

Chapel

Portage

Loch Eye

Geanies

Cadboll

Hill of Fearn

Hilton of Cadboll

Shandwick

Nigg   Hill of Nigg

CROMARTY FIRTH

Cromarty

MORAY FIRTH

LEGEND

View shed

Portage

10m contour

Contours

Current sea level

Sea level in the eighth century

FIG. 16

Plan of the Tarbat peninsula, showing the probable line of the portage and the viewsheds of the
principal stone monuments. *Copyright University of York.*

the ruling houses of the Picts and the Scots between 750 and 850, there would certainly have been a major incentive to invest in a monastery founded by Columba but situated in the heartland of the Northern Picts.[50]

Other neighbouring sites in the Moray Firth area also have the capacity to throw light on the elusive kingdom of the Northern Picts, their politics and the intriguing question of their conversion to Christianity. Recent studies of the processes of conversion have emphasised that the first Christian missions might be separated from institutionalised versions of Christianity by long experimental periods of up to 300 years, involving numerous small ideologically diverse territories.[51] According to this model, neighbouring polities with different ideological agendas could co-exist, creating a patchwork of peoples each characterised by different kinds of monumental investment. In the Moray Firth area, we can suppose that the monastic community on Tarbat Ness co-existed with non-believers at Burghead and Golspie in the 7th century and later. The question of when or whether the Picts as a whole were Christianised thus becomes redundant: the communities of the north-east could adopt a variety of different ideological options, which may or may not have been recognised as orthodox Christianity by their neighbours. These experiments could have continued until the political unifications of the 9th century and later demanded their resolution into ideological conformity.

At present we are probably entitled to believe that Portmahomack was Columba's port, founded during his expedition in the 6th century on the nearest thing that the saint could find to an island at the opposite end of the Great Glen to Iona. This peninsula estate, with its landing beach and portage, developed over the next 250 years in close association with both Dalriada and Northumbria, while maintaining the substrate of Pictish culture that survived in its symbols. By A.D. 800, the peninsula was the object of massive investment in the form of some of the most impressive monumental sculpture known from Early-medieval Europe. Placed at the edges of the peninsula overlooking the surrounding seas, the huge and complex cross-slabs functioned as seamarks and portals to a famous if ephemeral ecclesiastical centre — an 'Iona of the East'.

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[50] Cf. P.Wormald, 'The emergence of the *Regnum Scottorum* : a Carolingian hegemony?', 131–60 in Crawford (ed.), op. cit. in note 40, 134.

[51] P. R. L. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity A.D. 200–1000* (Oxford, 1997); M. O. H. Carver, 'Conversion and politics on the eastern seaboard of Britain: some archaeological indicators', 11–40 in B. E. Crawford (ed.), *Conversion and Christianity in the North Sea World* (St Andrews, 1998); idem, 'Why that? Why there? Why then? The politics of early medieval monumentality', 1–22 in A. Macgregor and H. Hamerow (eds.), *Image and Power in Early Medieval British Archaeology: Essays in Honour of Rosemary Cramp* (Oxford, 2001); idem, 'Introduction: northern Europeans negotiate their future', 3–14 in Carver (ed.), op. cit. in note 48. Such a patchwork model may be what Simon Taylor is showing, when he uses *kil*-names to demonstrate Columban penetrations in Atholl and Easter Ross: 'Place-names and the early church in eastern Scotland', 93–110 in Crawford (ed.), op. cit. in note 40, 103.