

This is a repository copy of *Early Scottish Monasteries and Prehistory: A Preliminary Dialogue*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/10449/>

---

**Article:**

Carver, Martin [orcid.org/0000-0002-7981-5741](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7981-5741) (2009) Early Scottish Monasteries and Prehistory: A Preliminary Dialogue. *The Scottish Historical Review*. pp. 332-351. ISSN 0036-9241

<https://doi.org/10.3366/E0036924109000894>

---

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

*promoting access to White Rose research papers*



**Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York**  
**<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>**

---

This is an author produced version of a paper published in the SCOTTISH HISTORICAL REVIEW

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/10449>

---

**Published paper**

Carver, M (2009)  
Early Scottish Monasteries and Prehistory: A Preliminary Dialogue  
SCOTTISH HISTORICAL REVIEW  
88 (226) 332-351  
<http://doi.org/10.3366/E0036924109000894>

---

## Early Scottish Monasteries and prehistory: a preliminary dialogue

Martin Carver<sup>1</sup>

*Reflecting on the diversity of monastic attributes found in the east and west of Britain, the author proposes that pre-existing ritual practice was influential, even determinant. An argument is advanced that this was not based solely on inspiration from the landscape, nor on conservative tradition, but on real intellectual reconciliation of Christian and non-Christian ideas, with disparate results that account for the differences in monumentality. Among more general matters tentatively credited with a prehistoric root are the cult of relics, the tonsure and the date of Easter.*

### Introduction

The last twelve months have been a bumper year for archaeological studies of the early medieval monastery, with colourful monographs appearing on Inishmurray, Inchmarnock, the Isle of May and Portmahomack.<sup>2</sup> Taken together with earlier syntheses from campaigns at Monkwearmouth/Jarrow, Hoddum, Whithorn and the tide mill at Strangford Lough (Nendrum),<sup>3</sup> we now have an excellent new basis for exploring this most determinant of Insular phenomena. The bold approach to field research we see in these publications should at least mean that archaeologists have escaped from the misleading assertions of small trenches, such as the death by a

---

<sup>1</sup> Department of Archaeology, University of York, King's Manor, York YO42 4PB. Email: [martincarver@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:martincarver@yahoo.co.uk).

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Lowe, *Inchmarnock. An Early Historic Island Monastery and its Archaeological Landscape*, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (Edinburgh, 2008); Heather F. James and Peter Yeoman, *Excavations at St Ethernan's Monastery, Isle of May, Fife 1992–7*, Tayside and Fife Archaeological Committee (Perth, 2008); Martin Carver, *Portmahomack, Monastery of the Picts* (Edinburgh, 2008); and *primus inter pares*, for its comprehensive discussion of monastic structure, Jerry O'Sullivan and Tomás Ó Carragáin, *Inishmurray. Monks and Pilgrims in an Atlantic Landscape*, vol. i, *Archaeological Survey and Excavations 1997-2000* (Cork, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas McErlean and Norman Crothers, *Harnessing the Tides. The Early Medieval Tide Mills at Nendrum Monastery, Strangford Lough*, Northern Ireland Environment and Heritage Service (Norwich, 2007); Christopher Lowe, *Excavations at Hoddum, Dumfriesshire. An Early Ecclesiastical Site in South-West Scotland*, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (Edinburgh, 2006); Rosemary Cramp, *Wearmouth and Jarrow Monastic Sites* (London, 2005); Peter Hill, *Whithorn and St Ninian. The Excavation of a Monastic Town* (Stroud, 1997); for valuable surveys see also Jenny White Marshall and Grellan Rourke, *High Island. An Irish monastery in the Atlantic* (Dublin, 2000); Jenny White Marshall and Claire Walsh, *Illauloughan Island. An Early Medieval Monastery in County Kerry* (Bray, 2005).

thousand cuts suffered by Iona,<sup>4</sup> and are ready to recognise the advantages of comprehensive inquiries at a more appropriate scale.

James Fraser's admirable synthesis has also appeared, providing us with a deeper, richer historical context for these findings.<sup>5</sup> Fraser emphasises the importance of the connections between the Picts and their own Iron Age, and the contribution offered here develops that theme.<sup>6</sup> While generating interim accounts of our discoveries at Portmahomack, I found myself increasingly drawn to investigate the debt that early monasticism owed to what had gone before, to the local Iron Age and indeed beyond it. The Christian idea of monasticism was of course an import into Scotland, ultimately from the eastern Mediterranean (where it may have had a prehistory of its own). But my focus has been on the diversity of monastic practice in Britain, a diversity that I tentatively suggested was due to the local intellectual and monumental inheritance, whether it be Roman, as in the south and east, or prehistoric as in the west and north.<sup>7</sup> This hypothesis was cited by one reviewer as a resurrection of 'Celtic Christianity',<sup>8</sup> but in fact the argument was situated in the archaeological premise, based on the observed variety of monuments, that there were many divergent Christian communities, just as there were pagan—an idea that now enjoys quite wide support.<sup>9</sup> The idea that Christianity may have varied between east and west in Britain generates the same level of anxiety among some historians that the idea of an Anglo-Saxon immigration does among some archaeologists. But jettisoning simplistic or anachronistic explanations does not absolve us from the obligation to explain differences, or to recognise similar monumental trends where we find them. Whether regional or supra-regional, such trends do not have to be defined as breakaway

---

<sup>4</sup> J. O'Sullivan, 'Iona: archaeological investigations 1875–1996', in Dauvit Broun and Thomas Owen Clancy (eds), *Spes Scotorum Hope of Scots. Saint Columba, Iona and Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1999), 215–44.

<sup>5</sup> James E. Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland: Scotland to 795* (Edinburgh, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> See e.g., Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Carver, *Portmahomack*, ch. 10; Martin Carver, *The Pictish Monastery at Portmahomack*, Jarrow Lecture, 2008 (Newcastle, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Alex Woolf, Review in *History Scotland*, Jan./Feb. 2009, 54.

<sup>9</sup> John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 2005), 5, speaks of 'those imaginary constructs the Celtic Church and the Roman church' and on the same page 'In the melting pot of early insular culture, influences from many sources re-combined and a wide range of alternatives was on offer'. The theme of diverse Christian communities was explored inter alia in Martin Carver (ed.), *The Cross goes North. Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300–1300* (Woodbridge, 2003).

churches in the post-reformation sense, even though that would hardly be uncharacteristic of Britain, or of Scotland in particular.<sup>10</sup>

There is increasing recognition that the early middle ages is a continuation of the Iron Age in many parts of Britain and Ireland. The territories with which we deal can often be shown to have been inherited from vaguer tribal regions, in Anglo-Saxon as well as Celtic areas.<sup>11</sup> However, in the archaeological study of sites we have also noticed another kind of tendency among the people we study, which is to adopt the archaic trappings of an earlier era as a form of self-expression. The Anglo-Saxons, for example, practised barrow burial, horse burial, and ship burial, ideas seemingly plucked out of a common past; they also adopted prehistoric sites for cemeteries and possibly for settlements.<sup>12</sup> In some of these cases, at least, it can be demonstrated that there *was* no continuity, so that we must argue that an idea has been remembered, reinvented, adopted, adapted or applied from some general intellectual stock, a process analogous to the writing of poetry.<sup>13</sup> What we observe archaeologically is not the moment that an idea is adopted, but the moment it is reified, turned into something solid for us to find. Having said that, we are some way from being able always to discriminate between continuity of community, the adoption of an ideology and its celebration on the ground. It is customary to take refuge in vaguer forms of interpretation: a monument ‘refers’ to older practices, an artefact ‘reprises’ earlier forms of ornament.

There is *prima facie* every incentive for making connections between early monasteries and their local prehistory, in spite of the revolutionary and revelatory

---

<sup>10</sup> Scotland boasts 42 varieties of post-Reformation Christian congregation (National Museums of Scotland).

<sup>11</sup> Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, 50 approves the equation of Fortriu with the Verturiones, as advanced by Alex Woolf, ‘Dún Nechtain, Fortriu and the geography of the Picts’, *Scottish Historical Review* 85 (2006) 182–201. For the adoption of Iron Age territories by the English, see Martin Carver, Catherine Hills and Jonathan Scheschkewitz, *Wasperton. A Roman, British and Anglo-Saxon Community in central England* (Woodbridge, 2009), 126–7.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Bradley, ‘Time regained—the creation of continuity’, *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 140 (1987) 1–17; Howard Williams, ‘Monuments and the past in early Anglo-Saxon England’, *World Archaeology* 30 (1998) 90–108; Sam Lucy *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death* (Stroud, 2000), 124 (and following).

<sup>13</sup> Martin Carver, ‘Burial as poetry: the context of treasure in Anglo-Saxon graves’, in E. Tyler (ed.), *Treasure in the Early Medieval West* (York, 2000), 25–48; *idem*, ‘Why that? why there, why then? The politics of early medieval monumentality’, in Helena Hamerow and Arthur MacGregor (eds), *Image and Power in the Archaeology of Early Medieval Britain. Essays in honour of Rosemary Cramp* (Oxford, 2001), 1–22.

character long credited to Christianity and the articulate and inspirational advocacy of their individual missionaries. It is a subject prey to rhetoric and conviction politics, and to reduce the power of these imposters to a minimum I propose merely to itemise the anticipated attributes of the early monastery as revealed on the ground, and advance a few observations about their prehistoric credentials. Then we will dig a little deeper to see if some of the aspects of insular Christianity, and some of its controversies, might owe their existence to prehistoric roots.<sup>14</sup>

### **Monastic attributes**

Enclosures, churches, burials, sculpture, writing, milling and territories are among the things that we expect to find associated with a monastic site. The shopping list was compiled from studies of Bede and Adomnán, together with observations on sites that were already known to literature, such as Iona, or Clonmacnoise. In some cases they have been understandably contrived, especially where they are not at all obvious on the ground.<sup>15</sup> And recently the list of attributes has been used to identify Portmahomack, a site that was not otherwise noticed as a monastery in the sparse documentation of the Picts.<sup>16</sup>

An *enclosure*, the so-called vallum, is thought to be a defining property of the early medieval monastery.<sup>17</sup> It provides an enclave of sanctity, a defence against the mundane, an actual island or an island-metaphor for the monastic calling. It was a high wall encouraging the penitent to look to his soul, or to look up to heaven as Cuthbert did from his cell on his island.<sup>18</sup> On the ground, these enclosures come in various shapes and sizes, often nested one within another, presumably reflecting how the devotional imperative was reconciled with increasing social, political, and commercial demands. At Nendrum, the enclosures are concentric and oval; on High Island, an oval enclosure embraces a square churchyard; Inishmurray, Inchmarnock

---

<sup>14</sup> I am very grateful to audiences at Paisley, Aberdeen, Cambridge, Birkbeck and Durham for their comments on the seminars that were earlier versions of this paper.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., at Whithorn: Hill, *Whithorn*, 67.

<sup>16</sup> Carver, *Portmahomack*, chap. 10, and Carver, *The Pictish Monastery*, for the arguments that Portmahomack was a Pictish monastery.

<sup>17</sup> E.g., Blair, *The Church*, 196: 'enclosure was fundamental to the monastic ideal'.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., Aidan Macdonald, 'Adomnán's monastery at Iona', in Cormac Bourke (ed.), *Studies in the Cult of St Columba* (Dublin, 1997), 24–44, at 42.

and Isle of May are oval islands with possible inner precincts; other enclosures are open enclosing D-shaped or C-shaped curves, against the sea at Iona and Portmahomack, and against a river at Hoddom. At Portmahomack the vallum was also rather practical: it collected water from the slope that rose beyond it and delivered it to parts of the settlement. It was no use as a defence, being open to the sea to the north and overlooked from a slope to the south. It was demarcated land, but not private in the devotional sense. That privilege belonged to a possible inner oval circuit around the church.

Sometimes, as expected, the vallum can be demonstrated to be a fresh creation of the convent: at Inchmarnock and Portmahomack the radiocarbon dates of wattles used to revet the ditches were obligingly seventh/eighth century.<sup>19</sup> But not always: there was a radiocarbon date from the Roman Iron Age at Iona.<sup>20</sup> The Irish secular analogue to the monastic vallum is the rath, a circular earthwork of which more than 40,000 existed, so far predominately of early medieval date.<sup>21</sup> In Britain, oval enclosures find their ancestors in numerous hill-forts, while penannular enclosures have a pre-echo along the coasts in the form of promontory forts where a single or a multiple bank and ditch encloses a small piece of land—e.g., Burghead in Moray, Coldingham in Northumbria, Tintagel in Cornwall. Whether new or re-used, the monastic vallum in the north and west seems to be a rath, or a promontory fort, adapted to a new or different purpose. This need not mean that it is intrinsically secular: just that if the curvilinear enclosure was a speciality of Irish and British Christianity, one can point out that it was a speciality of the pre-Christian islands too—and possibly for all the same reasons of demarcation and intellectual separation.

By contrast, the monastery of the east and south may be placed in a Roman fort, as at Burgh Castle or Canterbury, the re-use of Roman fabric being also a common prescription in Mediterranean lands.<sup>22</sup> The lay-out, such as we have seen at Jarrow

---

<sup>19</sup> Lowe, *Inchmarnock*, 252; Carver, *Portmahomack*, 209.

<sup>20</sup> O' Sullivan, *Iona*, 238–40; Marc Schneiders shows that early medieval Irish writers were aware of the references made by Christian monasteries to the Pagan strongholds they had superseded. ‘Pagan past and Christian present’ in ‘Félire Ó-Engusso’, in Doris Edel (ed.) *Cultural Identity and Cultural Integration. Ireland and Europe in the Early Middle Ages* (Dublin, 1995), 157–69.

<sup>21</sup> Frank Mitchell and Michael Ryan, *Reading the Irish Landscape* (Dublin, 1997), 255–7.

<sup>22</sup> Blair, *The Church*, 188–9 discusses the reuse of Roman sites for monasteries; for monasteries in refurbished Roman towns see e.g., Crypta Balbi, Rome, or Santa Giulia, Brescia: M. O. H. Carver, *Arguments in Stone. Archaeological Research and the European Town in the First Millennium*

and Wearmouth, is rectilinear and its references, as Rosemary Cramp has pointed out, are to a Roman villa.<sup>23</sup> This was a format with a future: it was to reappear in the St Gall Plan and in the cloisters of the great medieval convents.

The *churches* were rectangular, orientated, constructed of drystone and notoriously difficult to date, but we can often identify which they were, because they are survivors in a later ecclesiastical enclave. Scottish archaeologists in pursuit of the form of early churches find themselves in Northumbria, gazing at the perfectly preserved proportions of Escomb, or in Ireland where simple rectangular buildings have survived on many known monastic sites. If the insular church arrived as a prototype and evolved with time, then the Irish corpus should show it. However, the most recent analysis showed rather that the variations in early church type were not so much chronological as regional, five main types being distributed to different parts of Ireland.<sup>24</sup> This implies the contemporary application of architectural ideas by local people, as opposed to, or in addition to, a missionary diffusion of the faith.

The succession of Christian church and Pagan temple on the same site, often surmised, has proven hard to substantiate archaeologically.<sup>25</sup> But in Ireland Pádraig Ó Riain has drawn attention to the adoption of pre-Christian boundaries for the siting of churches, noting that it ‘represents a feature of Christian behaviour which appears to be totally modelled in Pagan example. The practice is apparently unparalleled elsewhere in Christendom, outside the Celtic realms. Moreover, it is without any obvious Biblical support.’ He sees the implied transfer of the title of sacred places as an economic imperative and ‘the root cause of the huge contingent of erstwhile deities among the –saints of the Irish church.’<sup>26</sup>

---

(Oxford, 1993), 46–7. Some local communities in England occasionally show a preference for curvilinear plans: Sarah Foot, *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England, c.600-900* (Cambridge, 2006), 99–106. But logic would then suppose these examples to be of prehistoric origin.

<sup>23</sup> Cramp, *Wearmouth and Jarrow*, 348–55; this blueprint was also transferred to Northumbrian monasteries in western regions, i.e., Whithorn.

<sup>24</sup> Tomás Ó Carragáin, ‘Pre-Romanesque Churches in Ireland: Interpreting Archaeological Regionalisms’, unpublished P.D. dissertation (University of Cork, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> E.g., the church defined as following the Roman temple at Uley: Ann Woodward and Peter Leach, *The Uley Shrines. Excavations of a Ritual Complex on West Hill. Uley, Gloucestershire 1977–9* (London, 1993); and the succession of church and shrine at Whithorn (Hill, *Whithorn*, 91–6).

<sup>26</sup> See Pádraig Ó Riain, ‘Pagan example and Christian practice’, in Doris Edel (ed.), *Cultural Identity and Cultural Integration. Ireland and Europe in the Early Middle Ages* (Dublin, 1995), 144–56, at 150.



In the area where we are currently touring, the west and north, *burials* were found on all our monastic sites, orientated east-west. They often include slabs of stone, and form a cist grave (where the slabs are large and line the sides, and sometimes the top of the body) or head-support graves (where stones are added as tokens at the head or side). These distinctive forms of burial are largely confined to the north and west, although a few peremptory examples appear in ‘Anglo-Saxon’ cemeteries.<sup>27</sup> They have been previously described as diagnostic of Christianity, and with some reason.<sup>28</sup> In Alpine districts, the cist and the head-support burials are found in numbers in the graveyards of early churches.<sup>29</sup> Thus, by tracking the first appearance of the long cist grave we could theoretically track the course of Christianisation. But why would stone slabs be used? Explanations have naturally been sought within the Christian mindset: the slabs and even the more token stones, are references to the tomb of Christ, the cave of the holy sepulchre, mediated, to be sure, through the Roman empire which brought the stone sarcophagus to new levels of display.<sup>30</sup>

This tidy equation has taken some recent knocks. Archaeologists have pointed out that the practice of lining graves with stone was not at all new in Christian Britain or Ireland.<sup>31</sup> Although the form varied, graves had been lined with stone from the Bronze Age, while the stone shelter, not to mention cave burial, has a still deeper, Palaeolithic, history that is world wide. In Britain, the places that use stone lining in the early Christian period are the same places that used stone lining in the prehistoric period. Some long cist graves, even some that are orientated and found in early medieval cemeteries, have now given radiocarbon dates in the Iron Age.<sup>32</sup> Far from tracking conversion, the long cist burial may rather track the endurance of a local prehistoric preference.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Discussed in Carver (and others), *Wasperton*, 37–8, 127–33.

<sup>28</sup> Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, 37, and refs.

<sup>29</sup> M. O. H. Carver, ‘S. Maria foris portas at Castel Seprio: a famous church in a new context’, *World Archaeology* 18 (1987) 312–29.

<sup>30</sup> J. L. Macdonald, in G. Clarke, *Pre-Roman and Roman Winchester Part 2: The Roman Cemetery at Lankhills*, Winchester Studies 3.2 (Oxford, 1979), 428, citing Matthew 27:60.

<sup>31</sup> Among the first was Joanna Close-Brooks, ‘Pictish and other burials’, in J. G. P. Friell and W. G. Watson (eds), *Pictish Studies: Settlement, Burial and Art in Dark Age Northern Britain*, British Archaeological Reports 125 (Oxford, 1984), 87–114.

<sup>32</sup> Carver, *Portmahomack*, 81–2, with refs to Lundin Links, Redcastle, Thornybank, and Innerwick.

<sup>33</sup> Not ‘all over Britain’, *pace* Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, 37.

Such a preference is not prevalent in the east and south. Here, on the one hand, there are seventh-century chamber graves with a variety of burial rites that look across the North Sea to Scandinavia<sup>34</sup> including the reuse of prehistoric mounds. And, on the other, burials that extol aspects of Roman and Byzantine apparel, especially in women's graves,<sup>35</sup> alongside the simple graves of the early monks. The east and south are eclectic, but differently eclectic, to the west and north.

The use of *stone markers*, with crosses incised or in relief and the occasional inclusion of a name, goes with monasteries everywhere, and often leads to the discovery of the site, as at Portmahomack. Stelae of the sixth and seventh century are ubiquitous and modest and mark the head or foot of a grave, sometimes carrying a simple cross, incised in free-hand, or geometrically cut or raised in relief.<sup>36</sup> These are the unequivocal badges of the new religion. From this seed corn grew the huge 3m high monuments of the eighth century, found at Ruthwell and Bewcastle in Northumbria, or at Aberlemno and St Vigean in southern Pictland or on the Tarbat peninsula in the Pictland's north or at Iona in western Scotland and in Govan in the south-west. These are the monuments of the church triumphant, emblazoned with the cross on one side and on the other with a great variety of scenes featuring people and animals. The interpretation of these scenes has a long tradition of ascription to the Bible, from Anderson to Henderson,<sup>37</sup> although the subject has had its dissidents. The famous hunt on the reverse of Hilton of Cadboll has been seen as a snapshot of aristocratic daily life<sup>38</sup> or the record of a wedding,<sup>39</sup> rather than a metaphor of Christ's

---

<sup>34</sup> Martin Carver, *Sutton: a Seventh Century Princely Burial Ground and its Context* (London, 2005), chap. 8

<sup>35</sup> Helen Geake, *The Use of Grave-goods in Conversion-Period England, c.600-c.850*, British Archaeological Reports 261 (Oxford, 1997).

<sup>36</sup> See Ian Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands*, RCAHMS (Edinburgh, 2001); Carver, *Portmahomack*, 100.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Anderson sees the hunting scenes as representing some 'commonly accepted symbol-picture involving some generally understood lesson of Christian doctrine': J. Romilly Allen and Joseph Anderson, *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1903) [hereafter *ECMS*], i. xlvi; George Henderson and Isabel Henderson, *The Art of the Picts. Sculpture and Metalwork in Early Medieval Scotland* (London, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> Leslie Alcock, *Kings and Warriors, Craftsmen and Priests in Northern Britain AD 550–850*, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (Edinburgh, 2003), 414–15; Anderson (*ECMS*, i. lxvi) writes of 'incidental illustrations of the life of a far off time for which the archaeologist is thankful'. This seems a subtler approach than assuming that the symbolic cannot also report details of the contemporary world.

<sup>39</sup> Kellie S. Meyer, 'Reading the Stones: the Pictish Monuments on the Tarbat Peninsula, Ross-shire' unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (University of York, 2004).

hunt for the soul or the Virgin Mary promulgating a parable of Conversion.<sup>40</sup> Further south at Nigg, it is hardly possible to doubt the Christian and indeed monastic reference of St Paul and Anthony in the desert, or on the reverse, King David. But there are Pictish symbols too, on both these great stones, so while the Bible was an important source, the scheme includes, *prima facie*, the voice of local interests. An alternative reading of Hilton, extendable to other cross-slabs, is that they are hagiographical celebrations of ancestral, perhaps mythical holy persons intended to provide the eighth century monastery on Tarbat with a prestigious past.<sup>41</sup>

This aside, we can note that large vertical monoliths were not exactly innovations in the north and west of Scotland. Tall standing stones, singly or in rows or circles, were specialities of the Bronze Age, and we know the early Christians could see them, because many still stand today. In Pictland, some were marked with Pictish symbols, so were ‘active’ in some sense in the Roman Iron Age or early Historic period.<sup>42</sup> What was it that connected these prehistoric ceremonial stones to the cross slabs? If these were elements of a language, we could say that straplines of the previous generation had been incorporated into the manifestos of the new. But they are more solid than words, being ever present, and often in prominent positions and on routeways. Furthermore, the transition is hardly direct; the standing stones are Bronze Age and the cross-slabs are eighth century AD. It is a case of one culture referring to another, for which we need a context. This in turn will require research on landscape use, to see whether the two systems are co-located or avoid each other—another instance of the pressing need for joint early medieval and prehistoric research which lies at the heart of this article. Meanwhile it would be prudent to note that every early medieval monastery is situated in a prehistoric landscape and is surrounded by visible prehistoric monuments. Whatever tales are told to diminish its influence, this landscape nevertheless presents a ‘bible’ of its own to the non-literate people who lived in it, and it would take more than a few sermons to erase it from the corporate mind.

---

<sup>40</sup> Henderson and Henderson, *The Art of the Picts*, 180–1; and Henderson in Heather F. James, Isabel Henderson, Sally M. Foster and Siân Jones, *A Fragmented Masterpiece: Recovering the Biography of the Hilton of Cadboll Pictish Cross Slab*, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (Edinburgh, 2008), 189: ‘a wholly Christian monument ... an image of the Virgin embedded in a Christian conversion allegory and enhanced by imagery adapted from a Psalter’.

<sup>41</sup> Carver, *Portmahomack*, 187–8; Carver, *The Pictish Monastery*; and see below.

<sup>42</sup> The nearest to Portmahomack being Edderton, which was later incised with Pictish symbols.

Monasteries produced *books*, Christianity's quintessential weapon, and must have manufactured them, planned them, copied them in ink and illuminated them—all activities that can be inferred from the surviving manuscripts themselves. Sometimes, as with the Lindisfarne Gospels, we have a strong indication of the scriptorium; others we wrangle over: the Book of Kells, the Book of Durrow, which seem to be best placed in Iona.<sup>43</sup> Julian Brown's attempt to place the Book of Kells in Pictland no longer seems so bold, thanks to the identification of vellum manufacture at Portmahomack, the preliminary first stages in the process of making a codex.<sup>44</sup>

At Inchmarnock we have been shown the still more evocative spectacle of children learning to write and draw. Scratched on one of the slates dumped in the school yard are the words *adeptus sanctum proemium* ('having gained the holy reward') extracted from the hymn *Audite pantes* composed in honour of Abbot Comgall who died in *ca* 602. Another slate has a drawing of an oversize personage in chain mail menacing a cleric apparently clutching a reliquary; perhaps the most vivid clip we have of monastic life struggling to re-establish itself following a Viking raid.<sup>45</sup>

How did the peoples of the north become so proficient in this scribal art—such that in the eighth century there is scarcely any European centre that can hold a candle to the codex-makers of the north? In our efforts to find a source for the insular gospels the trail leads naturally to the heart of the old Empire, where the transition from roll to codex was effected. We may imagine missionaries setting out from Rome or Constantinople, perhaps accompanying a consignment of red plates and amphorae filled with wine and olive oil, to instruct the Celtic northerners in the wonders of the book. This may have been so, but excavators have observed elements of indigenous adaptation that, once again, seem to lend some agency to the locals. Insular gospel books are decorated with an art that had its roots in the local Iron Age, rather than Rome, expanded and enhanced to fill a folio rather than a shield.<sup>46</sup> Even on the technical side, there is an ingenuity at work in these craft communities. While a

---

<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Alexander, *Insular Manuscripts 6<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> century* (London, 1978), nos 6, 52.

<sup>44</sup> Julian Brown, 'Northumbria and the Book of Kells', *Anglo-Saxon England* 1 (1972) 219–46; Martin Carver and Cecily Spall, 'Excavating a *parchmenerie*: archaeological correlates of making parchment at the Pictish monastery at Portmahomack, Easter Ross', *PSAS* 134 (2004) 183–200.

<sup>45</sup> Lowe, *Inchmarnock*, 137–41, 151–6.

<sup>46</sup> See Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, 10.

missionary might arrive with a book, he did not necessarily bring the wherewithal to make one. To produce leather white enough and smooth enough to write on you must dunk it in alum and smooth it with chalk—but at Portmahomack there is no lime, and the only source of chalk lies on the north side of Skye. So they burnt seaweed from the beach and the millions of tiny spirorbis shells clinging to the seaweed made a fine astringent ash, for tawing and for pouncing.<sup>47</sup> That is not to say that the codex-makers of Britain and Ireland decided to go it alone; at Portmahomack they used erasers of pumice that were clearly imported, maybe such as Willibrord had collected from the slopes of Mount Etna.<sup>48</sup> The message rather is that the ideas had arrived some time before their adoption; Christianity was certainly an eastern Mediterranean import, but its transmission is perhaps less relevant for us than its reception. It is not even certain that it needed all that much transmitting.

We would probably do well to credit our unconverted British and Irish intellectuals with a wide and deep knowledge of their world and its philosophical and political concerns. Drawing on analogies from missionary work in Africa, Michael Richter proposes ‘two strands of learning’ in Ireland, a lengthy co-existence of Christian with non-Christian intellectual programmes.<sup>49</sup> The people living in Britain had at least 300 years, possibly longer, to assess the merits of Christianity before accepting it. These Celtic minds were themselves not blank slates on which missionaries could write, nor were they slow on the uptake. They needed time and they took it. While many individuals no doubt experienced personal enlightenment, ‘conversion’ refers to the subsequent institutionalisation of belief that in turn caused monuments to be made, and the event to become archaeologically visible. Before this, a period of parallel, and often opposed, intellectual movements, as proposed for Ireland, seems appropriate for Britain too.

Monasteries need *plate*: chalices and patens to serve the mass and reliquaries to house the relics. These were made of bronze, gold or silver and the little crucibles and moulds which make them have been found at a number of sites. Portmahomack also

---

<sup>47</sup> Carver and Spall, ‘Excavating a *parchmenerie*’.

<sup>48</sup> C. Jenkins, ‘Christian pilgrimages, AD 500-800’, in A. P. Newton (ed.), *Travel and Travellers of the Middle Ages* (London, 1926), 39–69, at 69.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Richter, ‘Models of conversion in the Early Middle Ages’, in D. Edel (ed.), *Cultural Identity and Cultural Integration. Ireland and Europe in the Early Middle Ages*, 116–28, at 127–8. He also invites us to identify the particularity of the Christian element as ‘Irish Christianity’.

had hearths, whetstones, and a carnelian gem, leftover from a recycled Roman or Byzantine gold ring. These were the manifestations of skills that had been developing in Scotland and Ireland since the Bronze Age, and were associated with an arcane and influential profession.<sup>50</sup> Portmahomack showed a down-to-earth evaluation of smithing. After the monastery was raided in about AD 800, the smiths re-appeared and restarted business on the smouldering ruins of the vellum workshops: not so much magicians, then, as craftsmen too valuable for political sacrifice. No self-interested tyrant would kill a smith.

The monastic community had to eat, and it grew grain and dried it. They herded cattle and milked them and slaughtered them, using the blood and meat for food, the horn to make boxes and the hides to make leather clothing and manuscripts. And like the seigniorial settlements they paralleled, the technology reflected with their power over the neighbourhood. In the sixth century the grain was ground by hand using the rotary querns known in the Iron Age. But from the seventh century in Ireland arrives that great machine, the horizontal *water mill*. The recent excavations at Nendrum have brought to light the queen of all examples, the tide mill on Strangford Lough, complete with wheel, paddles, wheel pit, penstock for canalising the jet of water and the mill pond itself, replenished at intervals by the tide. The mill appears to have been an introduction of the early middle ages, and should belong to the imported technology of Christianity. In late Roman Europe there were watermills in profusion, if mostly vertical, and none of these, I believe, makes use of the tide. But the horizontal mill is still thought to have its origin in the Mediterranean lands.<sup>51</sup>

Outside the churches, archaeologists have defined some *ancillary buildings*, but their forms and functions are notoriously elusive. At Jarrow we saw some fine rectangular buildings end to end, making direct reference in their proportions to the contemporary timber halls of Yeavering. So these should have been halls too, and are seen as serving the needs of the monks for eating and meeting.<sup>52</sup> Further north and west, the monastic buildings are often scarcely credible, with their tumbled stones, random

---

<sup>50</sup> Andrew Heald, 'Non-ferrous metal-working in Iron Age Scotland (c. 700BC to AD800)', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (University of Edinburgh, 2003).

<sup>51</sup> McErlean and Crothers, *Harnessing the Tides*; Philip Rahtz and Robert Meeson, *An Anglo-Saxon Watermill at Tamworth*, Council for British Archaeology Research Report 83 (1992), 156.

<sup>52</sup> Cramp, *Wearmouth and Jarrow*, 352.

post-sockets and vanished sod walls. Curvy and ephemeral, they were built, it seems, by poets rather than engineers, buildings in which the architects' mental images were more solid than their foundations. It may be that these rambling not-quite-round, not-quite-square plans reflected what was put up, a tottering other-worldly contraption largely held together by prayer.<sup>53</sup>

But some doubts that this type of ad hoc construction represents a real building (as opposed to the wreck of one) have been raised by the Portmahomack excavations, at which two working buildings were defined, the smith's hall (S1), which had miraculously escaped the plough, the rabbit and the mole, and the vellum-workers hall (S9), which was an incoherent set of post holes and curved walls of the more familiar kind, but which retained enough in its battered carcass for archaeologists to recognise that it had once been as beautiful as its neighbour. The well-preserved S1 had two phases, the first of which displayed an almost perfect symmetry. Its perimeter stone foundation, of beach cobbles, formed a semi circle joined to a trapezium. Inside, a ring of evenly-spaced post-holes followed the curve of the semi-circle, and paraded in pairs through the trapezium. Each post was founded on a slab of sandstone cut from the same block—the bedding planes matched. The centre point of the semicircle was a small post socket, its origin.

The symmetry of the plan was an invitation to geometry and it was not long before its admirer was being seduced by *numerology*. Some commentators have seen numbers and symbolic messages embedded in biblical texts and, with almost shamanistic insight, have noted patterns in the wobbly letters and poorly spelt Latin of western inscriptions.<sup>54</sup> The numerology of S1 was much less mysterious; its geometry was perfect, and the dimensions became whole numbers when transferred from metres (the archaeological measure) to inches, and thence to a 'Tartat Foot' of 12 ½ inches. The radius of the semi-circle and the spacing of the bays gave a sequence which followed the Fibonacci series, the ratios of which tend to the golden number.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> E.g., Hill, *Whithorn*, chap. 3.

<sup>54</sup> D. R. Howlett, *British Books in Biblical Style* (Dublin, 1997). Charles Thomas, *Christian Celts. Messages and Images* (Stroud, 1998); effectively discredited by Helen McKee and James McKee, 'Chance or design? David Howlett's insular inscriptions and the problem of co-incidence', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies [CMCS]* 51 (2006) 83–101, with responses by Howlett and the McKees in *CMCS* 56 (2008).

<sup>55</sup> Carver, *Portmahomack*, 128–32.

Of course the Fibonacci series was written down in the thirteenth century, and the Golden Number and its inverse, the Golden Section, are guidelines of the Renaissance, where they define the ratio of the sides of a painting that gives the greatest aesthetic satisfaction. But it would not be amazing if this satisfaction were more ancient, since it is rooted in nature: it is the rule by which a shell builds its spiral. Nor would it be surprising that the people who incorporated spiral patterns into their sculpture and Gospel books should draw on similar geometric properties for their architecture. We can accept that these intellectuals were as fascinated as we are with the beauty of numbers. The prime numbers, the Fibonacci series and their golden section, perhaps even the geometry of Pythagoras was, it may be reasonably hypothesised, part of the world they had inherited. The satisfying and semi-mystical properties handed down were incorporated into their crafts, not as theorems of precocious mathematicians, but in recognition of the works of God and executed to his greater glory.

These little self-sufficient cities, each like a university campus, sat in the middle of an *estate* and it was the task of the monks to mark out this estate and expand it to its limits. On islands, this was the beach or the cliff. At Inishmurray, a ritual path ran round the cliff edge, connecting special sites marked by *leachta*, each probably calling to mind a holy ancestor.<sup>56</sup> Space was divided and organised, into concentric arenas as at Nendrum, into zones as at Reask, round the burial ground as at High Island, by roads as at Iona and Portmahomack; and, although they belong to a later phase, it is not impossible to see a memory of earlier schemes in the splendid set of radial paths at Inchmarnock. On land, estate limits could also be marked out by standing stones or by shrines. The estates expanded throughout the eighth century, their borders eventually bumping up against each other.<sup>57</sup> Some of the sites became towns, as Cashel or Clonmacnoise and as has been claimed for Whithorn. Others were nipped in the bud by the Vikings—such as Iona, Jarrow and Portmahomack.

---

<sup>56</sup> O'Sullivan and Ó Carragáin, *Inishmurray* in their outstanding essay, 316–48. See Charles Thomas, *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain* (Oxford, 1971), 172. For an example of a ritual landscape from Wales see Heather James, 'The cult of St David in the Middle Ages', in Martin Carver (ed.), *In Search of Cult. Archaeological Investigations in Honour of Philip Rahtz* (Woodbridge, 1993), 105–12.

<sup>57</sup> Tomás Ó Carragáin, 'A landscape converted?', in Carver (ed.), *The Cross goes North*, 127–52.



Portmahomack was on a peninsula that featured at least three other sites of comparable grandeur in the eighth century, at Nigg, Shandwick and Hilton of Cadboll, each with a magnificent decorated cross-slab. Shandwick is the only one of the three still in situ, and it stands on the break of slope looking out across the Moray Firth to Burghead and the Grampians beyond. Nigg stood at one time on a small promontory overlooking the Cromarty Firth. Portmahomack's four cross slabs would have faced the Dornoch Firth from the top of the dune. The original siting of Hilton of Cadboll is much less sure, but whether it was near the beach, or up on the hill above, it still looked on to a northern stretch of sea.<sup>58</sup> Field work on the peninsula has suggested that these four eighth century monumental sites marked out the limits of the monastic estate, as the monuments of the Ballinskellig estate in Dingle or the *leachta* on Inishmurray.<sup>59</sup>

Each of the known Tarbat cross slabs was erected in the same period.<sup>60</sup> They present monumental carved crosses as their principal feature, but carry different Pictish symbols and different figurative scenes, which include both certain references to the Bible, and less certain references to Pictish or Iron Age artefacts.<sup>61</sup> As mentioned above, a recent hypothesis reconciles these elements by supposing that the stones celebrate episodes, real or imaginary, in the life of a local saint, and that their purpose was to create a prestigious but local origin for the Tarbat peninsula and its monastery.<sup>62</sup> It is interesting that these holy heroes do not apparently include Columba or Nechtan, players assumed by our age to have been influential in bringing Christianity to Easter Ross. The evidence that these may be local saints is of course circumstantial. But the edges of the peninsula are fringed with prehistoric burials and with medieval chapels and holy wells,<sup>63</sup> and there is some convergence of the prehistoric and the medieval evidence at the principal sites: Portmahomack, Nigg,

---

<sup>58</sup> The definitive study prefers an original location by the sea shore next to the medieval chapel of St Mary: James and others, *A Fragmented Masterpiece*, 72, 388.

<sup>59</sup> Carver, *Portmahomack*, 174, fig. 9.1.

<sup>60</sup> Henderson and Henderson, *The Art of the Picts*, 181.

<sup>61</sup> For example the bridle, shields, trumpets. See Alcock, *Kings*, and Anderson in *EMCS* (cited in n.38, above).

<sup>62</sup> Above; Henderson prefers to keep all the imagery locked into the Christian idiom, and proposes that the differences between the cross-slabs reflect different ritual performance owed at each; Henderson and Henderson, *The Art of the Picts*, 181, Henderson in James (and others), *A Fragmented Masterpiece*, 201.

<sup>63</sup> Blair, *The Church*, 377 endorses the view of an association of holy wells and medieval churches as 'an incoming system of parish churches adapting itself to a more primitive religious landscape'.

Shandwick and Hilton. A functionalist would argue that this is where the beaches are, so people would invest there too. But we can at least note that the periods both before and after the *floruit* of the monastery are also tinged with an odour of sanctity. It is this that underpins the argument that this peninsula, the nearest thing to an island on the north-east coast, was a sacred enclave from prehistoric times, experiencing a holy *longue durée* in which the early historic monastery was an episode.<sup>64</sup>

### **The elephant in the room**

In this splendid crop of monastic investigations there is a lot that is new, that is new to archaeology today and also revealing of things that were new in the early middle age. Of my original list, some of the monastic attributes have proved, as expected, to be obvious Christian imports, but others are more equivocal. In the area that was to become England, monasteries were founded in Roman forts, and the blue-print for the building, it can be argued, was a Roman villa. Burials were labelled with finely chiselled Latin or Runic inscriptions; for women, burials were Roman in aspect even outside the monasteries. In the west and north by contrast, prehistoric forms were chosen—the rath or the promontory fort, and within them the spaces were defined by curvilinear zones. The churches were rectangular, but the outbuildings were round, like their Iron Age predecessors, where they were not ‘originals’ like S1 at Portmahomack. Cist graves were used where prehistoric religions had used them. Standing stones were erected in landscapes where Bronze Age standing stones already stood. Even the defining Christian technology of making books and sacred vessels had an adaptive local technology, and a new celebration of local prehistoric art—like snatches of folk song redeveloped as themes in a great classical symphony. In some cases there were hints that the monastic estate or island enhanced a much more ancient holy place. Thus in our search for the explanation of variation in early

---

<sup>64</sup> There are examples of possible prehistoric burials within most of our prime monastic sites. O’Sullivan and Ó Carragáin, *Inishmurray*, report a Bronze Age cist (199), and earlier phases of burial on NE-SW orientation from which no dates could be obtained (293), but ‘all in all there is no reason to suspect that these are not Christian graves’ (347). Lowe, *Inchmarnock*, 59–68, reports axe-heads, a cup-marked stone, cairns, cists and caves along the shore, including the famous burial of the ‘Queen of the Inch’ with her jet necklace (radiocarbon dated to 2133-1902 cal BC). He supposes the island to be an area for prehistoric settlement, and ‘no remote and deserted refuge for the incoming religious community’. James and Yeoman, *Excavations at St Ethernan’s Monastery*, 13, detect the presence of prehistoric cremation urns, ‘which raises the possibility that the island was used for burial even in prehistoric times.’

medieval monasticism, the elephant in the room is simply the local prehistory, which for the Anglo-Saxons appeared to be the Romans who had occupied Britannia<sup>65</sup>.

### **Digging deeper**

In many ways this is not an overly contentious hypothesis. Some historians are comfortable with a diverse Christianity—which is what archaeologists find on the ground. From Ireland to Kent, says Peter Brown, each area in the British Isles had developed, as it were, its own, distinctive, ‘micro-Christendom’: ‘Each area was convinced that its own local variant of a common Christian culture was the ‘true’ one.’ He does not offer us a reason for this, but comments that ‘The inhabitants of the island [Britain] had an almost embarrassing range of traditions from which to choose so as to build up their own micro-Christendom’.<sup>66</sup> There is a hint of a role for the ghost of prehistory in his image of the learning process: ‘we must remember the extent to which (in Britain as in Ireland) Christianization often took place, on the ground, through a wide penumbra of half-participants who had gathered round the monastery. Much of this was ‘self-Christianization’ based on a zest for knowledge of arcane matters and on a search for new sources of supernatural power whose force we tend to overlook when we study the relations between the barbarians of the north and the new religion.’<sup>67</sup>

The searches for ‘new sources of supernatural power’ implies that there were existing sources, again not a matter that is contentious in principle, since even the most evangelical historian will surely acknowledge that Christianity was preceded by many millennia of intellectual activity. It is more difficult to argue that the previous intellectual frameworks survived. John Carey argues that the Irish, perhaps alone in Europe, found acceptable and compatible roles for pre-Christian deities in the new order, allowing them to reflect “not devilish trickery and evil magic, but the perfection of human nature as God had first created it”. An idea, he finds, “of

---

<sup>65</sup> The range of Roman and prehistoric origins for Welsh monasteries is argued and neatly summarised by Nancy Edwards and Alan Lane, *The Archaeology of the Early Church in Wales: An Introduction* in *idem.* (eds) *The Early Church in Wales and the West* (Oxford, 1992), 10.

<sup>66</sup> Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity AD 200–1000*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Oxford, 2003), 358.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

brilliant originality, startling boldness, and beautiful simplicity.’<sup>68</sup> This tempts us to see the religious thinkers of Ireland, and with them Wales and Scotland, as perhaps especially ready to reconcile their accepted Christianity with what had gone before.

The matters I have highlighted serve to intimate that local variants were due to previous local practice, but not everyone will see this as an intellectual decision as opposed to inertia, or simply making do. In this bid to include prehistoric thinking in the creative mix, the desire may exceed the performance, because the ‘texts’ of prehistoric thinking, namely the landscape, burial rites, settlement plans and so forth, are so inarticulate compared with, say, early poetry from Iona.<sup>69</sup> To take the argument further we have probably got to dig up matters that are more behavioural in character, and I have chosen to put three on the table, well aware that I am attempting to open a debate rather than close a case. They are the cult of relics, the tonsure and the date of Easter.

The received wisdom on the *cult of relics* is that in general they came in with the Christian package. Here is Charles Thomas: ‘In the Mediterranean where the cult of relics began with the Christian martyrs of the pre-Constantinian age, years of careful and intensive research ... have established beyond doubt that this cult is central to the development of most early church architecture.’<sup>70</sup> He presumes that the shrines used to house them were also imported: ‘The custom of enshrinement in both Britain and Ireland is ultimately derivable from the cult of the martyrial tomb in the early church of the Mediterranean and western European regions. It reached our shores at different times by different routes and in slightly different versions.’<sup>71</sup> Peter Brown also assumes that relics are an essentially Christian invention: ‘a sense of the mercy of god

---

<sup>68</sup> John Carey, *A Single ray of the Sun. Religious speculation in early Ireland* (Celtic Studies Publications, Andover and Aberystwyth, 1999), 32; 20-32. See also comment by Ó Riain, above.

<sup>69</sup> E.g., Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Márkus, *Iona. The Earliest poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh, 1995).

<sup>70</sup> Thomas, *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain*, 132 (and following).

<sup>71</sup> Charles Thomas, *Bede, Archaeology and the Cult of Relics*, Jarrow Lecture 1973 (Jarrow, 1973), 8. Thomas finds evidence in the life of Jesus that he was regarded as touched with magic power, and reminds us that such *virtus* is associated with the remains of any holy person through the ages. But he declines to draw the obvious conclusion, asserting that Roman relics taken to Britain would have acted as models: *ibid.*, 4.

lies at the root of the discovery, translation and installation of relics'.<sup>72</sup> John Blair acknowledges the work on archaeologists in finding relic-like reverence in Scandinavia, but confidently assures us: 'A cross or relic had an utterly different meaning and power-source for Cuthbert or Wilfred than an amulet for a sixth century wise woman'.<sup>73</sup>

However, we now have better evidence for a cult of relics in Britain, and one that is a lot older than late Iron Age Scandinavia. Ann Woodward has shown that the human remains in Neolithic chambered tombs represent selected bones: skulls, right arms, hand and legs were the preferred objects. These were curated and exchanged between tombs—which therefore became more like a shrine than a tomb.<sup>74</sup> Mike Parker Pearson has found curated, trussed and mummified bodies which had been kept for decades before being buried under the floor of Bronze Age dwellings at Cladh Hallan, on Lewis.<sup>75</sup> Wait's 1985 thesis reported the retention and manipulation on Iron Age hill forts of 'certain symbolically representative bones—mainly skulls and long bones of the right hand side of the body'.<sup>76</sup> This curation of the head continued into the Roman period. It is hard to recognise when the finds are fragmentary, but the known Iron Age sites with head niches like Roquepertuse allow us to interpret the fragments as deriving from the destroyed shrines where they had been kept. There is thus the beginnings of a case that the cult of relics was already in Britain before the first Christian millennium. The Christian prescription may well come mainly via the eastern empire or Rome, but there is now a new factor to explore: the idea of the local adaptation of a pre-existing practice, in which we would certainly expect diversity within the norm, the norm being essentially the ancestor cults that are thought to lie deep within every early religion.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (London, 1981), 92; 100: 'the festival of the saint, and installation of relics used to reinforced structures of patronage and solidarities that bound together the Christian elites of the western Roman empire in its last century'.

<sup>73</sup> Blair, *The Church*, 174

<sup>74</sup> Ann Woodward, 'The cult of relics in Prehistoric Britain', in Carver (ed.), *In Search of Cult*, 1–8.

<sup>75</sup> M. Parker Pearson (and others), 'Evidence for mummification in Bronze Age Britain', *Antiquity* 79 (2005) 529–46; *idem*, 'Further evidence for mummification in Bronze Age Britain', *Antiquity* 81 (2007) ProjGall /313.html.

<sup>76</sup> G. A. Wait, *Ritual and Religion in Iron Age Britain*, British Archaeological Report 149 (Oxford, 1985).

<sup>77</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* (Oxford, 1991).

The last two items on the agenda are designed to reflect on the real issues behind the argument at the Synod of Whitby. You will remember that it concerned the tonsure and the date of Easter and that these were matters important enough to be resolved by Oswy in person. Maybe it was just a matter of liturgical error, or a scholastic wrangle, but it has a flavour of an older allegiance: St Colman defended his Celtic party with the words: ‘The Easter customs which I observe were taught me by my superiors, who sent me here as bishop; and all our forefathers, men beloved of god, are known to have observed these customs’. For the purpose of the ecclesiastical debate he sought authority in John the Apostle and Anatolius. But Wilfred retorted scathingly that the Columban church followed neither John the Apostle nor Anatolius: ‘the only people who stupidly contend against the whole world are these Scots and their partners in obstinacy the Picts and the Britons’.<sup>78</sup>

So why did they? In 2002 Natalia Venclova published a paper pointing out that the description of the Celtic tonsure matched that of the Iron Age holy man as realised in images on statues and other objects.<sup>79</sup> While the round ‘dinner-plate’ tonsure was Roman in origin, the Celtic tonsure, which shaved the forehead ear to ear was depicted on, for example, prehistoric images of heads from Mšecké Žehrovice, Yvingnac and the Gundestrup cauldron, with the implication that this was the standard headwear of the priestly cult. Later generations may have termed them the druids and made a tangled net of their associations,<sup>80</sup> but there can be no serious doubt that the Iron Age had its own spiritual specialists, or that they ritualised their personal appearance. The reason for confrontation here was then self-evident: the Christians were not the first holy men on the scene, and there were older loyalties and earlier wisdom to consider—and probably a whole lot of reactionary academics to placate, when constructing the new intellectual orthodoxy.

Explaining the date of Easter takes us potentially into still tougher territory. The council of Nicea, which fixed the date of Easter, tried to reconcile the date of the Jewish Passover, shortly after which Jesus was executed, with a lunar event which

---

<sup>78</sup> *HE* III.25.

<sup>79</sup> Natalia Venclova, ‘The Venerable Bede, druidic tonsure and archaeology’, *Antiquity* 76 (2002) 458–71.

<sup>80</sup> Stuart Piggott, *The Druids* (London, 1968); Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe. The History of the Druids in Britain* (London, 2009).

was preferred by the west Asian Christians. They came up with the formula we know as the first Sunday following the first full moon following the spring equinox—an obvious confection designed to please everyone.<sup>81</sup>

The supplanted method of calculation, once widespread within the church, had apparently lingered on for different lengths of time in parts of Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Thus no prehistoric explanation is necessary to account for the diversity explored at Whitby. However, it is not without interest that the use of the error was geographically distributed within the British Isles, which at least raises the possibility that ancestral allegiances were operating. There can be no doubt that the meaning of Easter was rooted in concepts of renewal and resurrection. John Carey shows that early Irish literature was aware of the movement of heavenly bodies and their connection with the recurring sequence of the seasons, and comments “It is at the time of Christ’s resurrection that warmth and light and flowers come again: the link between Easter and the vernal equinox has its base in the universe’s fundamental harmonies.”<sup>82</sup>

The way northern prehistoric time was measured is not known with the same certainty as Mediterranean time, but it seems fairly likely that it was measured in some way, and the henges, standing stones and stone circles have long been surmised as having some calendrical function. Here is a recent verdict: ‘Religious specialization is now hardly to be doubted at the stone circles of Stonehenge and Avebury ... observation of the sun and moon at such sites was part of the calendrical interest seen over much of Britain, especially in the Highland Zone. Even if the megalithic unit of measurement was related to the pace or span rather than to a fixed universal standard there can be no doubting the precision and geometrical skill with which they were laid out. Specialist observers or seers—in effect a priesthood—were a feature of this society’. The author of these comments was not some astro-enthusiast or even Alexander Thom but Colin Renfrew; and such an interpretation is indeed well aligned with the mission of cognitive archaeology which he champions.<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun, A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford, 1996), 179.

<sup>82</sup> Carey, *Single Ray*, 85

<sup>83</sup> Cited in C. L. N. Ruggles, *Astronomy in Prehistoric Britain and Ireland* (London, 1999), 81.

The credibility of the calendrical functions of megaliths is a huge untidy subject, and a current expert, Clive Ruggles, rightly urges us to reason carefully and not give way to eager guessing and imaginative leaps. Nevertheless he is able to demonstrate consistency of usage among the constructors of the recumbent stone circles of NE Scotland and the axial stone circles of SW Ireland, both of whom aligned their monuments with lunar events.<sup>84</sup> In Kilmartin Glen, Douglas Scott followed Ruggles' advice by recording solar and lunar events at first hand rather than measuring them on paper. There is no doubt that the alignments are significant, as are the incised spirals, which record a position of the sun and the cup marks which record positions of the moon.<sup>85</sup> In a recent thesis, Michael Wilson produced a highly sophisticated calendar for the County Kerry stones. Using alignments between standing stones and the profile of the neighbouring hills, he proposed that both solar and lunar cycles could be measured, and found ways of measuring the same events at twenty-three sites.<sup>86</sup>

I have carefully avoided asserting any particularities of calendar use, because we do not know them. I go only so far as to say that *if* seasonal or ritual events were measured by standing stones, then where stones stand, ritual or seasonal events may have been measured. Once constructed, these monuments became 'indelible marks in the landscape, part of the established order, influencing peoples' understanding of the world for generations to come'.<sup>87</sup> Thus any discussions relating to the prediction of the dates of seasonal festivals, whenever they happened, could hardly have avoided taking account of those that had been in operation since the Bronze Age or earlier. Whatever event, or combination of events, is deduced to mark it, Celtic Easter usage coincides with the Megalithic area of Britain. The lack of stone in the south and east might mean that it had less of a prehistoric memory. But the landscape was studded with Roman ruins. For this reason, if for no other, it is plausible that the Romans provided the Anglo-Saxon church with its prehistory.

Many years ago the Classicist A. R. Burn published an article in the first issue of the *Glasgow Archaeological journal* called 'Holy Men on Islands in Pre-Christian

---

<sup>84</sup> Ruggles, *Astronomy*, 100. These same well-separated regions have the later ogham in common.

<sup>85</sup> Douglas Scott, 'Astronomical observations at Kilmartin Glen', *Antiquity* (forthcoming).

<sup>86</sup> Michael Wilson, 'Bronze Age astronomy: new survey, new horizons', *Antiquity* 80 (2007) ProjGall/308.html.Antiquity.

<sup>87</sup> Ruggles, *Astronomy*, 158.



Britain'.<sup>88</sup> Using casual asides in Roman literature he supposed that there were Iron Age spiritual specialists living as hermits, as well as living in colleges, on islands in the Irish Sea region. In other words there was a type of monasticism already up and running in this area before the Romans came. Everything we have discovered since adds to the impression of a strongly intellectually Iron Age community with wide contacts—and perhaps this is what Colman meant by 'all our forefathers, men beloved of god'. Up to now they have been rather excluded from the discussion of how Christianization worked—and about what early monasticism really was. I have suggested that the Tarbat peninsula was itself a kind of holy island in the Iron Age and perhaps before. Columba, or his lieutenant was not allocated some piece of land that no-one wanted, but a piece already imbued with sacred force. He was simply the latest holy man to arrive. A. R. Burn ended his paper with the words: 'but here conjecture had better draw rein'. As you see I have been rather less wise.<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> A. R. Burn, 'Holy men on islands in pre-Christian Britain', *Glasgow Archaeological Journal* 1 (1969) 2–6.

<sup>89</sup> I am grateful to Dauvit Broun and an anonymous referee for their kind advice, for drawing my attention to other sources, particularly to John Carey's inspirational *Single Ray of the Sun*; and for the correction of some of my errors and omissions.