CHAPTER 4

The monks arrive

The Tarbat peninsula, now fertile and intensively farmed, was once a savage and varied terrain. Low-lying areas north of the Bay of Nigg were then flooded, making a narrower isthmus connecting a long eastern ridge to the mainland. There is a hint of an Iron Age fort, but no prehistoric settlement has yet been brought to light on this peninsula by formal excavations.[1] So the large area opened at Portmahomack poses this question: who, if anyone, lived here in prehistoric times? Two leaf-shaped flint arrowheads and a barbed and tanged arrowhead came from several acres of excavation, suggesting no more than late Neolithic hunting expeditions.[2]

Suggestive of something more special was the carved stone ball found among the rubble of the seventeenth-century church (Fig. 4.1). Beautifully fashioned from hard stone, these stone balls are perfectly spherical and often decorated. More than 400 have been collected so far. They are found *only* in eastern Scotland, and there is nothing quite like them from any prehistoric period, anywhere else. Their distribution on the map (Fig. 2.2) is uncannily similar to that of Pictish sculpture (another unique and superlative art form), but most scholars think they are much older than the Picts; current opinion is that they were made at the end of the Neolithic and beginning of the Bronze Age (about 2000 BC). With their shapely grooves and protrusions, the balls are sensual, and some people suppose them to be erotic in intent. Others note the extraordinary variety of forms, and believe them to be emblems of particular families. Others see them as coshes, strapped to a stick, like the clubs of North American Indians or South Sea Islanders. Others have suggested they were used in a game, in which the balls were hurled along the dunes in a pre-echo of *boules* or golf, each contestant having his own distinctive ball. In general, scholars currently prefer to see them as amulets or talismans, sacred objects from the huge, complex, high-investment world of British early prehistoric religion.[3] The stone ball from Portmahomack is thus an oblique indication of Bronze Age ritual activity by the sea shore. That activity, as we shall see, included burial from the Bronze Age onwards.

But was there a settlement there? A saddle quern was seen in 1948 built into the north-west gate post of the churchyard gate abutting Tarbatness Road,[4] and this has raised the possibility of prehistoric cultivation nearby. Certainly in the flat ground south of the church we found numerous examples of ard marks, not criss-cross as perhaps would have been expected from prehistoric ploughing, but thin parallel lines (see Plate 3b);[5] and in the northern quarter was a scattering of plough pebbles, thought to have been thrown out of turfs cut for later building.[6] The imprint of a slight, but perfectly circular building was defined at the south-east corner of the excavations, cut

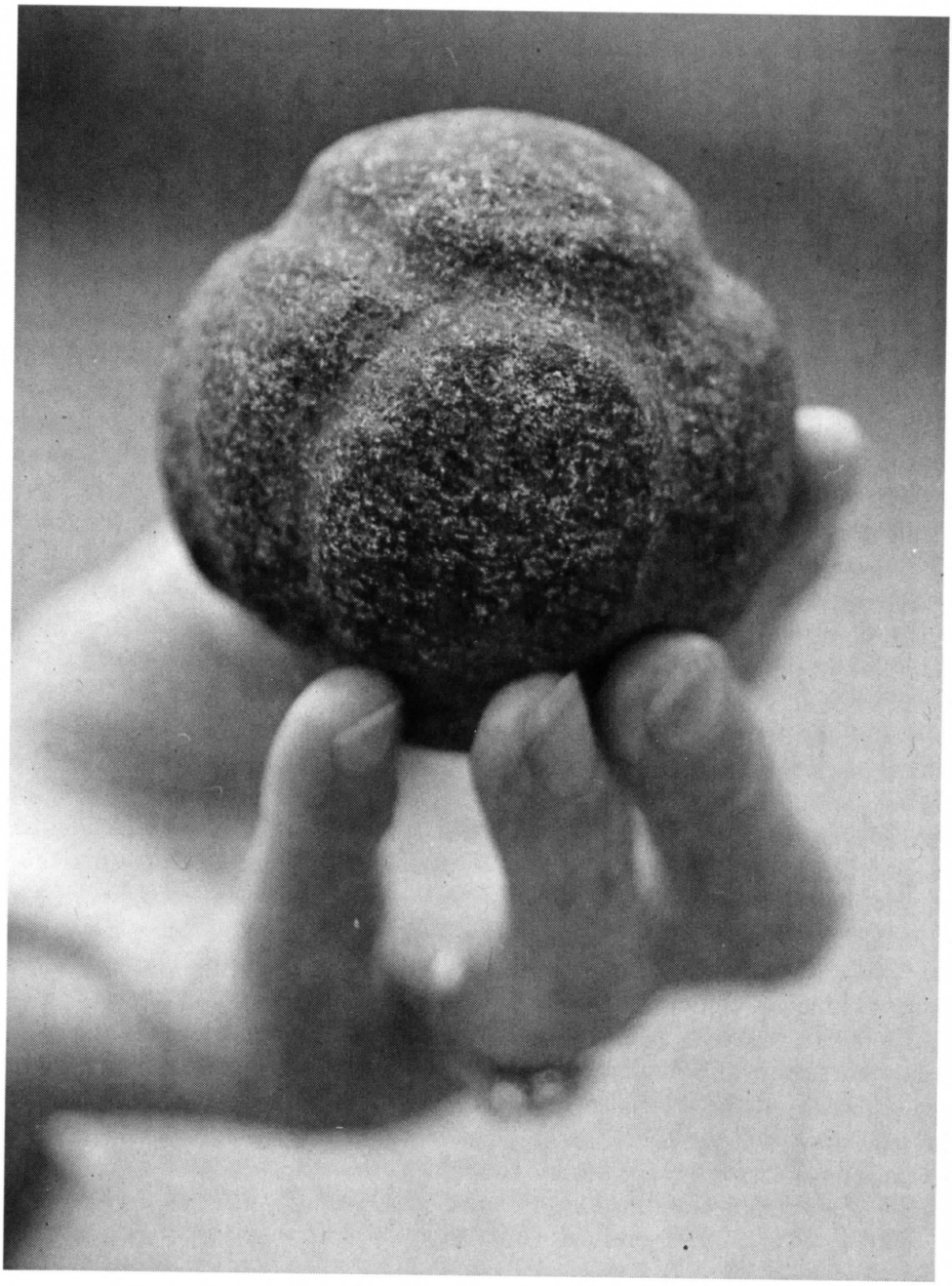


Fig. 4.1 *Carved stone ball from St Colman's church, late Neolithic/early Bronze Age.*

by later constructions of the ninth–eleventh centuries – perhaps this was the modest farmstead of Tarbat's prehistoric occupants (see Fig. 3.11). Such traces hardly come up to the popular gathering expected at the best landing beach in the Firthlands. Orkney archaeologists, for example, have defined a settlement from the second–fifth centuries

Fig. 4.2 *Filtration pit, for purifying water with charcoal. Scale 1m.*

AD at Mine Howe that featured round houses and pottery with comb decoration and moulds and crucibles making pins and spear butts within an enclosure containing a deep and massive stone-built well. That is more like it. But Fraser Hunter has pointed out an extensive gap in settlement evidence in eastern Scotland between the third and fifth centuries AD, so we are not alone. Hoards suggest that the Iron Age peoples, the Caledonians, and in the Firthlands the Verturiones, were pacified by massive bribes of bronze and silver in the period AD 160–250, but in the next two centuries they had to go out and fight for it.[7] By the time Columba made his journey up the Great Glen in AD 565, Bridei, king of the Picts, was occupying a hillfort near Inverness, and his peers were no doubt fortifying theirs. In such restless times, there may have been land going begging. There was no prehistoric pottery from the excavations, and the ard marks and the plough pebbles, and indeed the building on the south-east side, can all relate to the earliest monastic activity. The earliest buried soil, under the church, in Sector 2 and in Sector 1, where it was cut by ard marks, was a lean silvery grey sand, the lower horizon of a podsol, a soil that had lost most of its fertility (context 1384). The possibility can be entertained that Tarbat by the sixth century was unwanted land, the kind of waste that a king might be happy to grant to an itinerant community of spiritual eccentrics.

Monastic Settlement

At the base of the valley was a marsh that had began to form, according to radiocarbon dating, during the Iron Age between 550 and 370 BC. It was still forming when

the monks arrived and chose to settle on the sandy ridge where the church now stands. They had dunes and the sea to the north of them and the marsh to the south. Top of their agenda was therefore the supply of fresh water, and they devoted some ingenuity to the task. They took rainwater off the hill and led it into stone-lined cisterns (see Plate 5a; also Digest, A6, for numbered data). They built a wicker-lined well, and they dug a shallow pit down by the water table, which they filled with finely divided charcoal (Fig. 4.2). The water came up through the charcoal clean and clear, filtered like the finest Bourbon. A gully found under the church was 1.3m deep from its own old ground surface and appeared to have been lined with timber – or it could have been a tree-trunk pipe. Cereal grains had arrived in it between 540 and 650 AD (F129; for dates, see Digest, A3). Animal bone in this period was mainly cattle. There was a small square hearth associated with slag that suggested metal-working, and a piece of worked bone and afragment of iron from the podsol (F535). This indicated some modest and preliminary agricultural and light industrial action on the slopes leading down to the marsh. But for our first sure sighting of the early community we rely on the remarkable sequence of burial, excavated inside and outside the church.

The Monastic Cemetery

The strata underneath the church could be defined in six 'horizons', the first three natural – three successive buried soils – and the last three artificial – builders' levelling or floors relating to successive churches (for data references within the church, see Digest, A4). Fifteen radiocarbon dates have been obtained and calibrated, and made more precise by using sequences of graves that had cut each other, so that their order of digging was known. The burial rites were surprisingly varied: some bodies had been buried with nothing, some with a shroud pin, some in coffins and some with large flat stones supporting the head (head support burials) or surrounding the whole corpse (long cists).

From this we learnt that there were two distinct periods of burial (Figs 4.3, 4.4). The first, from *c.* 550 AD to *c.* 900, were mainly middle-aged or elderly men, often buried in long cists, or with stone head supports (Figs 4.5, 4.6). The second period ran from *c.* 1100 to 1600, and included men, women and children, sometimes with shroud pins and coffins. This result indicated with unusual clarity that two cemeteries had succeeded each other at Portmahomack, the first belonging to a community mainly of men, the second to a succession of families; the first to a monastery or something very like one, and the second to a parish church. There was, moreover, a gap between them: in the tenth–eleventh centuries, it seemed, no one was buried.

The dead and buried monastic community could itself be divided into an early and a later group. Three of the earliest graves were not actually found in the church, but down the hill adjacent to the workshops in Sector 2. These were aligned north-east/south-west, the head being towards the south-west (F515, F516, F517). The most northerly had a lid and a double wall of slabs; the next had a fine cist of large single slabs, and the third, the body well decayed, had no cist. The central burial of the three gave a radiocarbon date in the range AD 430–610. There is no doubt that the later

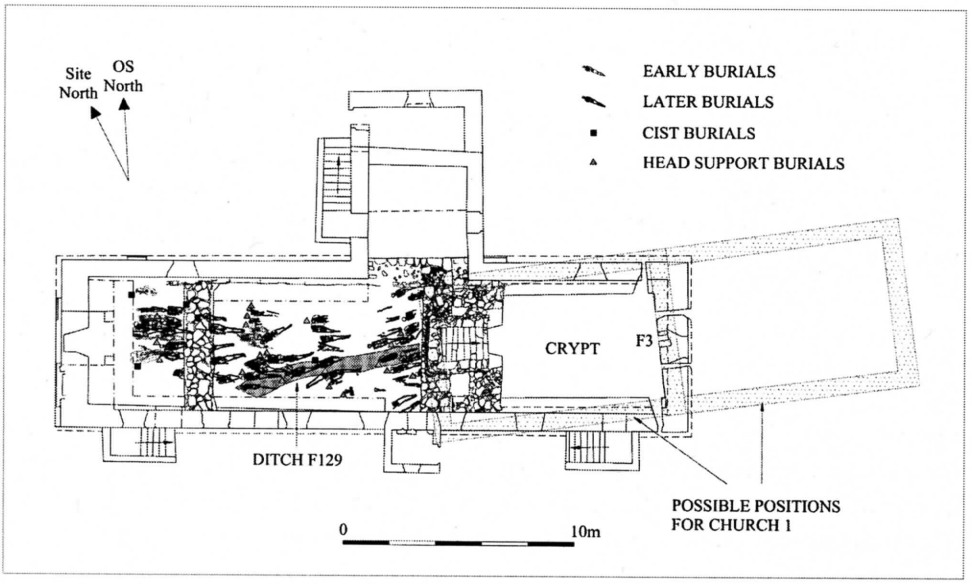


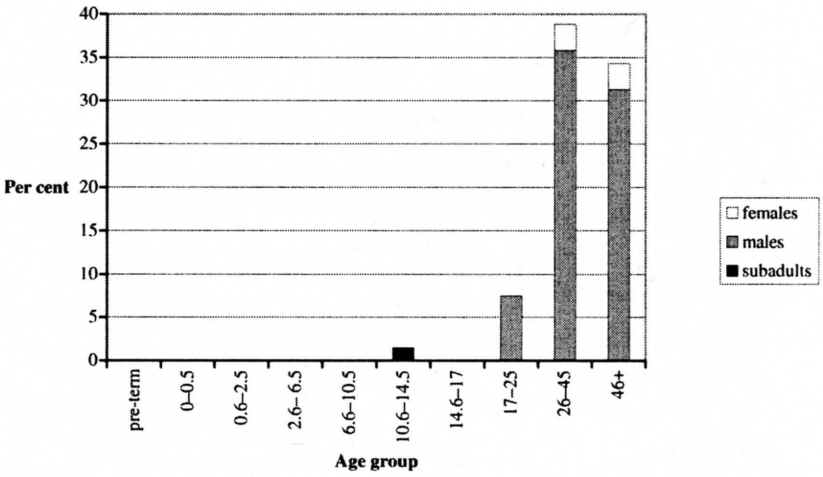
Fig. 4.3 *Monastic period burials, divided into the early (Phase 1, below Horizon B) and later group (Phase 2, below Horizon C), with cist and head support burials distinguished. The early gully F129 is also shown.*

monks would have been aware of these graves, particularly as one was graced with an earth mound covered by a row of stone slabs. The curbed edge of the later tawing platform (see Chapter 6) followed the line of their south-west ends.

The earliest burials rediscovered under the church, eleven of them, were concealed beneath a layer of pinkish sand (Horizon B), and were all buried in cist graves, well furnished with large slabs of local sandstone. Another dozen burials, not in cists, formed part of this group (Phase 1), making twenty-three in all. Their dates ranged from the sixth and seventh centuries. Interestingly, these people included the monastic period's only women (three of them), one among the earliest, dying between AD 535 and 605. Five of the bodies had their heads to the north-east or south-west. Most of these graves were found on the west side of the top of the hill, under the west end of the present church. A southern boundary for the cist graves seems to have been formed by the timber-lined gully (F129).

The burials of the next phase (Phase 2), fifty or more, had been generally cut into the pink sand and sealed by a brown soil above it. They included twenty-four head support burials and one on a layer of charcoal (Burial 147). Their radiocarbon dates placed them within the eighth or ninth century, and they were mostly men, young, middle-aged or elderly. Sarah King, the osteologist who examined this monastic group, found that they had narrow faces and nasal apertures, medium-sized eye orbits and broad palates. They were relatively short by modern standards: 5ft 7in for men, 5ft 3in for women. Almost all suffered from one or more types of dental disease, including calculus (plaque), caries (cavities), dental abscesses, ante-mortem tooth loss and periodontal disease. The monastic teeth were very worn in comparison to the

(a) Age and sex distribution sixth – ninth centuries



(b) Age and sex distribution twelfth – sixteenth centuries

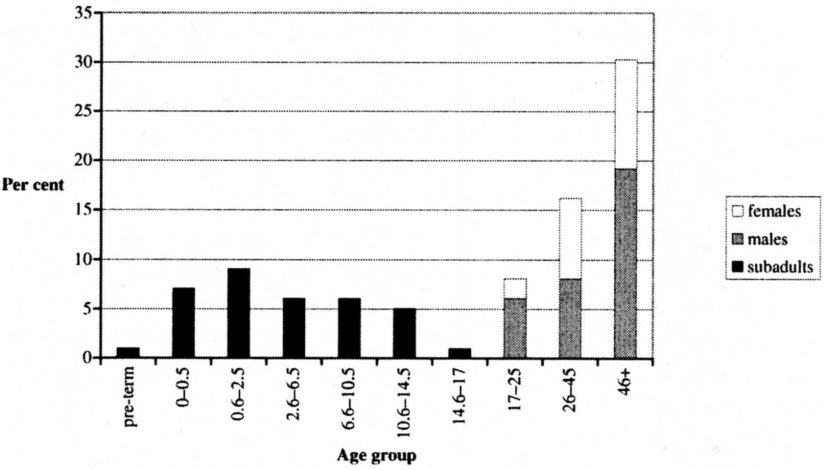


Fig. 4.4 *Sarah King's identifications of age and sex from (a) Phases 1 and 2, sixth–ninth centuries; and (b) Phases 3 and 4, twelfth–fifteenth centuries. (Source: Sarah King)*

teeth from the later parish community, suggesting that the first monks had a coarse diet that needed a lot of chewing. They had also suffered from age-related diseases, such as osteoarthritis of the joints and spine, and facets from much squatting. There were three cases of spondylosis (a condition of the lumbar vertebrae that may occur

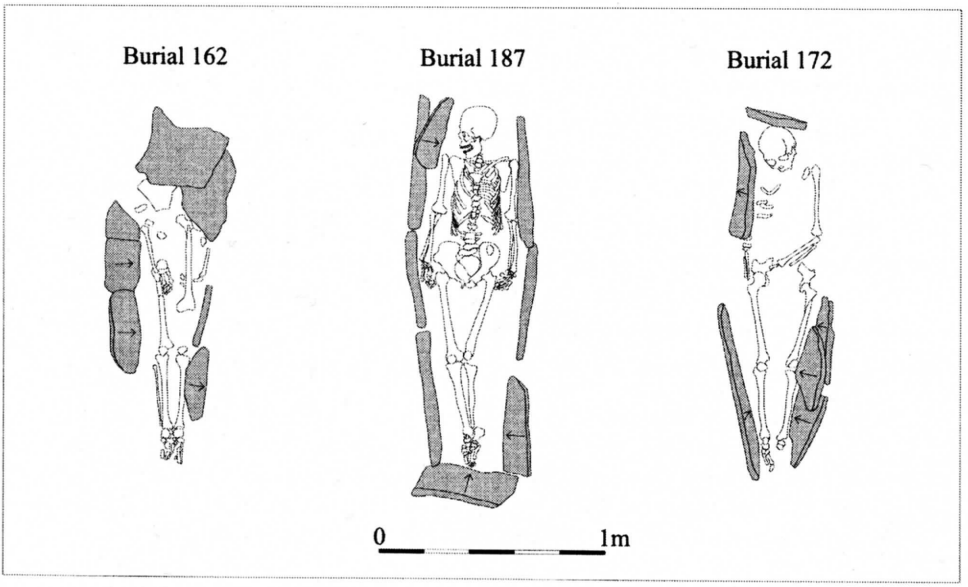


Fig. 4.5 *Cist burials from Portmahomack.*

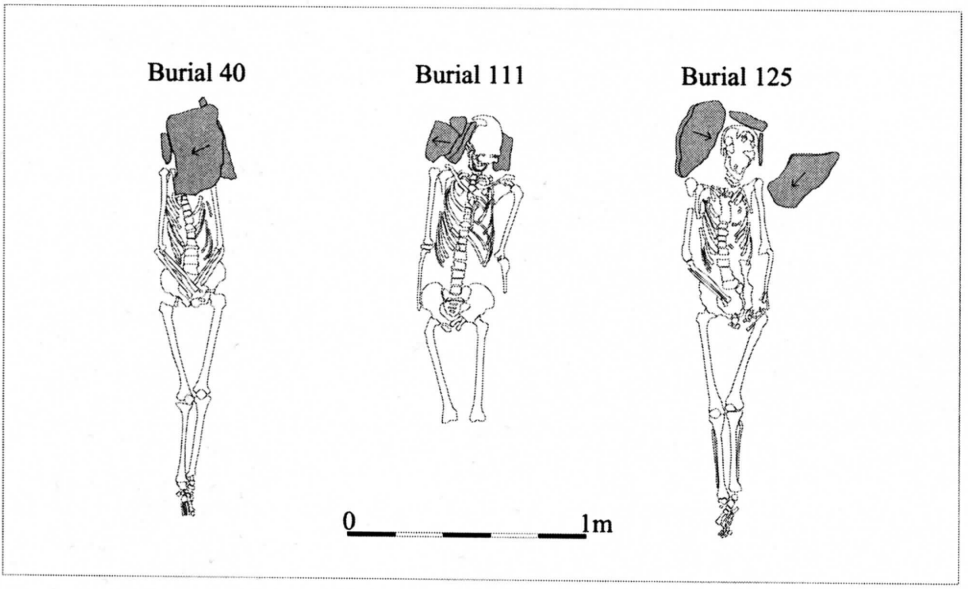


Fig. 4.6 *Head support or pillow burials from Portmahomack.*

as a result of bending and lifting in an upright posture) and three cases of compression fractures of the vertebrae (possibly as a result of a vertical force injury). There was evidence for hernias, suggesting much lifting, and a disproportionate amount of battering to the left clavicle and right proximal fibula (lower leg). We may safely say

that many of the early monks at Portmahomack had 'done their back in'. The evidence from the cemetery, the workshops and the sculpture that we are about to explore provides ample indications of the probable cause of the problem: they were lugging enormous stones about.

Three individual monks had received major blade wounds, cutting them to the bone (Burials 152, 158, 149). One had suffered a face-to-face encounter with a long sword between 680 and 900 (Burial 158) – but survived it. Another who died of his wounds (Burial 152) had three sharp cut-marks to the skull: one wound approximately 72mm in length extending across both parietals with radiating fractures, a second wound bisecting the lamboid suture on the left side, and a third blow on the right side of the occipital. The specialist commented, with forensic detachment:

> As two of the cuts were on the back of the head, it is likely that the assailant attacked from behind. Given that one of the fractures was on the crown of the head, the individual may have been below the assailant at one point (e.g. kneeling). As injuries with larger weapons are more likely to produce terminal fractures, it is possible that a weapon such as a large sword may have been used to produce these fractures.[8]

The victim of this attack expired between 810 and 1020 – arousing strong suspicions of Norse aggression – and indeed this skull has made an appearance on television in *The Blood of the Vikings*. But who really attacked Portmahomack, and when, are matters that will be considered in their place.

This sequence suggests that the Portmahomack cemetery began in the sixth century or before and endured to the ninth, and contained mainly men – a picture that fits well with a monastery founded at the time of Columba and terminating in the time of the Norsemen. But we need to explore how far our sample represents the whole; medieval cemeteries are known or suspected in which men and women were buried separately, and this is thought to perpetuate a practice begun in early Irish monasteries.[9] So the women may have been buried elsewhere, although still in the vicinity, a possibility enhanced by a gradual awareness that the early burial ground at St Colman's was a part of something much larger and in use for much longer.

With the stimulation of anecdote, old rumour and new searches consequent on our dig, stone-lined burials are now known to have been found all along the ridge overlooking the Firth, both north and south of Tarbat Old Church. The Revd D. Campbell, compiling the *New Statistical Account* in 1845, reported:

> There is, above the village of Portmahomack, a green hill, called Chapel Hill, where there were discovered, on levelling the ground for new buildings, a number of human bones deposited within rough flags of freestone . . . Several chests, composed of rough freestone flags, were dug up a few years ago, at a place in the neighbourhood of Portmahomack, by labourers employed in levelling the ground for new buildings. Each chest contained an entire skeleton, of a size unusually large, and, from the position of the bones, it appeared that the bodies had been doubled.[10]

In 1957 the *Third Statistical Account* noted that many fragments of human bones had been found at Chapel Hill during building and gardening. The author, James R. Cheyne, liked this for the site of the earliest church, and it may be so.

But down the coast in the opposite direction, at Balnabruach, burials have also appeared from time to time. Two long cists were reported during a drainage operation in 1977. The skeletons were both extended, a woman in her late 30s lying north–south and a man between 16 and 25 in a grave above, aligned east–west. There was also a short cist, which the attendant archaeologist dated to the Bronze Age. Surviving bones from three of these graves gave radiocarbon dates of fifth–fourth centuries BC and third–fifth centuries AD. Second- and third-hand reports suggest that such burials, or their slabs, were encountered all along the shore line south of the church.[11] Other searches of old finds have revealed encounters with burials on the east coast of the peninsula too. The coast had, it seems, been attracting burials long before the arrival of any monks. This theme is taken up again in Chapter 9.

In summary then, there is a good case for the ridge along the west coast of the Tarbat peninsula being used for burial before the monastic community was established, perhaps as early as the Bronze Age and certainly within the long Iron Age from the fifth century BC to the fifth century AD. There is a likelihood that during monastic times there were numerous other burials, with slabs, north and south of the church, on this same ridge. These, of course, may well have included women, and have continued after the ninth century. However, on the summit within the present church, an area that should represent the heart of the monastic cemetery, the great majority of burials were of mature men dying between the sixth and ninth centuries. These may not represent the whole community or its whole existence, but perhaps they can be seen as its leading members during their period of control. In this central area there is a stratigraphic argument for a gap of 200–300 years before burial began again, and it did so within the walls of a parish church. This part of the story will be taken up again in Chapter 8.

Stone-lined burials of this kind are known from all over Europe in the centuries following the Roman Empire, so we are not surprised to find them in Portmahomack. The best sequences on the continent are certainly associated with Christian churches, and many of these have an evolutionary change from the grander to the more peremptory version of the rite. At Saint-Laurent in Grenoble, Renée Colardelle excavated a sequence of stone-lined burials, starting with sarcophagi of Roman type and ending with graves marked by random stones. All these surrounded a stone church which evolved in the opposite sense to the graves, becoming more elaborate as the graves became simpler.[12] At Castel Seprio in north Italy the church of Santa Maria foris Portas began in the eighth century with a founder tomb built in mortared stone with a massive slab lid on which was an image of a sword raised in relief; cist graves followed and then tombs furnished sparsely with a few upright slabs[13]. Nearer home, similar kinds of tomb are found in Wales, for example, at Llandough, where 1,026 burials dated from the seventh–tenth centuries included three cists and five head support burials.[14] Pictish Scotland took to this kind of burial with special enthusiasm. Of 145 burials excavated at The Hallow Hill, near St Andrews, 122 were in long cists and another 13 in graves edged with boulders, dated between the sixth and ninth centuries AD.[15] Comparable burials have been found the length of Pictland, from Fife to Caithness.

It is natural to assume that these burials refer to Roman practice, and are Christian in meaning. Magnar Dalland notes that the cist cemeteries at Avonmill, Hallow Hill, Four Winds and Catstane came into use in the mid-fifth century, 'a short time after Ninian had begun his mission to Whithorn'.[16] The authors of the report on Lundin Links describe it as 'a small Christian community' and give its dates as AD 450–650, but they nevertheless feel that the origin of the rite should be sought in British south-east Scotland between the second and fourth centuries AD.[17] As we have seen, two probable long cists from Balnabruach in Easter Ross date to the third–fifth centuries AD, and, in the same region, Bronze Age people, Iron Age people and Viking people also buried their dead using slabs of stone when the occasion demanded. Cist burials may be covered with kerbed stone cairns, both round and square, dating broadly to the first millennium AD, and it may be that, in a country where slabby burials were common, no Christian meaning was necessarily intended.[18] Something, however, is labelling the east coast of north Britain with this burial practice – something shared in Wales but not in England. Whether this is ethnic or religious or traditional or pragmatic – stone is used where stone is found – are matters best left on one side until the evidence as a whole has been reviewed. In the meantime there is no doubt that the majority of graves found at Portmahomack were of people who professed Christianity. Over 200 pieces of Christian sculpture have turned up in and around the church, deriving from a dozen grave markers, a sarcophagus and four monumental free-standing vertical cross-slabs. These will be described, and their intellectual context explored, in Chapter 5. For the moment we can observe that on any current theory they all date to between the sixth century and the ninth – the time that the monastic cemetery was in use.

We can, therefore, claim to have an early Christian population that was managing water in its early days and was later crippling itself carrying (and erecting) heavy stones. A few women were members of the original party, but the group apparently soon felt it could dispense with them. This was a community that did not rely on procreation for its survival, so there must have been a continual supply of imported adult males ready to break their backs at Portmahomack over three centuries. The demographics of such an artificially renewed population are hard to predict. We have seen only a fraction of the cemetery, so, assuming it was spread over the hill that carries the present church, we could multiply the number of dead by ten, to make it 600, which would be two persons dying every year. Taking a hypothetical life span of 60, we could suggest a constant population of about thirty, few enough when we reflect all they had to do. The nominal community could have been bigger than that, since, as we shall see, there is good reason to suppose that many were ceaselessly travelling (see Chapter 10).

A Stone Church?

If one important reason for shifting large amounts of stone was making sculpture, another was to build a church. It is not credible that Christian Picts had no churches, but the problem is to find them. The obvious place to look in Portmahomack was beneath the present church, but, although the search was thorough, later walls hid earlier ones. The most important lead was given by the east wall of the crypt, which

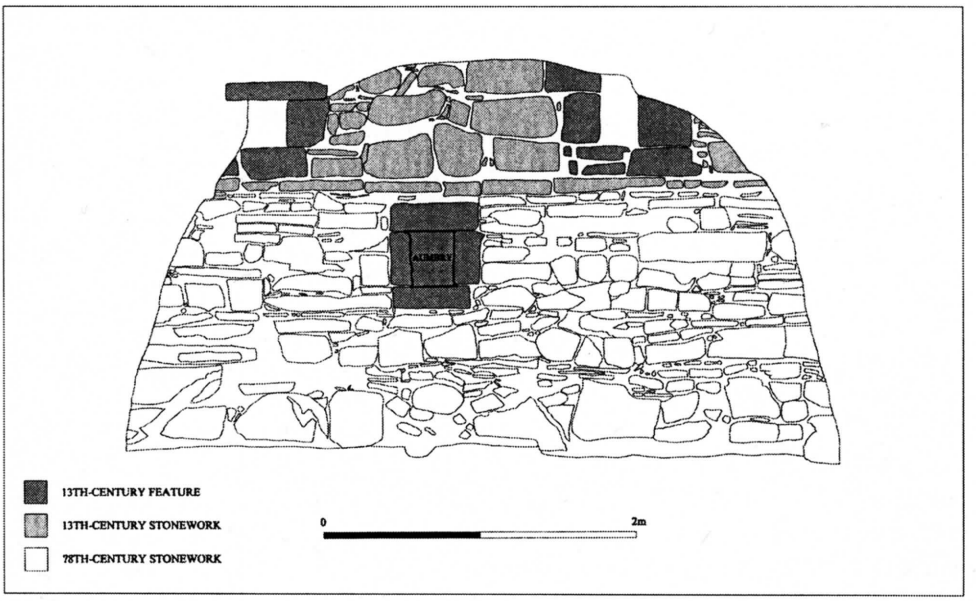


Fig. 4.7 *Elevation east wall of the crypt (F3).*

was out of alignment with every church structure that followed. It was, therefore, a candidate for a pre-existing wall that had been incorporated into a later church. The later church-building began in about the twelfth century and endured in the same place until today (see Chapter 8). No other walls were seen in the churchyard or under the church that have to belong to the monastic phase. So we are looking for a single stone building to go with this wall.

Several arguments can be deployed, and the reader's patience is requested to hear them out, since the matter concerns the only known church in Pictland. There are plenty of certainties about eighth-century Tarbat, but this is not one of them. The questions to be addressed are:

- Was there a Church 1?
- Did it run east or west from its one surviving wall?
- How was it adapted by the church-builders who followed?
- What form did it take?

To answer these questions to an acceptable degree of plausibility it will be necessary to take into account the heights of walls and the old ground surfaces, the way walls joined together and the probable form of early churches in Celtic area. Of all these things, we have only a partial knowledge (for a summary of the relevant data, see Digest, A3).

Was there a Church 1?

There was a large amount of sculpture of Christian character datable without much controversy to the sixth–ninth centuries. Its makers should have had a church, and it

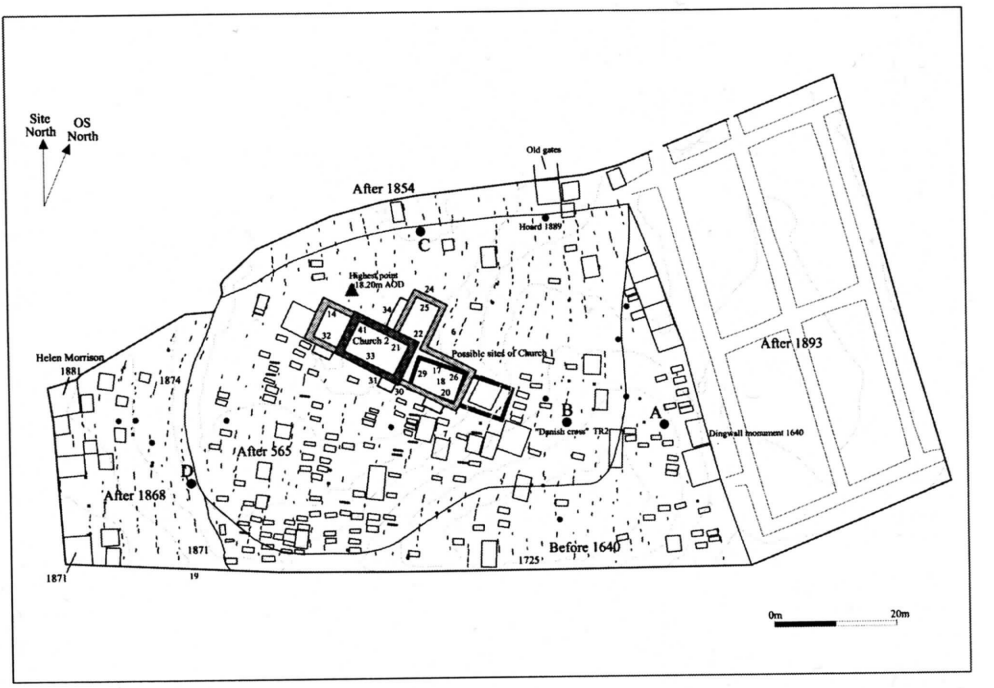


Fig. 4.8 *The churchyard, showing its development from an oval original, with two possible positions for the early church. Also shown are the probable locations of the four monumental crosses A–D to be discussed in Chapter 5.*

is the way of churches to keep to the same spot. This is a reason for supposing that the first church lay under the present one – that is, where we had the chance to look, rather than elsewhere on the hill. The first church may have been a construction in timber, since this is the form that an early Celtic church might be expected to have taken, although there was no evidence for it. Post-holes would not have evaded our excavators, but there were none that formed a pattern. Some indication for the presence of a church, and for its position, is provided by the burials. The earliest of these were found at the west end of the present church (and further west still), but burials of the monastic period continue all the way under the east wall of Church 2. Moreover, their alignment conforms increasingly to that of the skewed east wall of the crypt, the closer they approach it. It could be concluded that a stone church was built somewhere towards the east end of the hill during the life of the cemetery, but not at its earliest phase. Another hint is that the gully seen among the early burials is best explained as taking water away westwards from a construction of some kind, one that generated a lot of water from a roof.

The architecture of an early stone church on the east of the hill is mainly implied by the alignment of the east wall of the crypt (F3; Fig. 4.7), an alignment that varies by 7 degrees from those of the other north–south walls encountered, including the west wall of the crypt and the walls of Church 2, the parish church that succeeded it in the twelfth century (Figs 4.3, 4.8). The crypt as we have it today is a

thirteenth-century design (Church 4), with an internal vault added in the seventeenth century (Church 5). Neither of these constructions can now be removed, so we are working blind, or only from hypotheses inferred from measurements. The east wall had an aumbry built into it, which may have been integral, although it was not quite central, as seen. Above the level of the aumbry, it could be seen that the crypt had been rebuilt in blocks of yellow sandstone, and the rebuild included four windows to admit light from the outside into the east end. This yellow sandstone ashlar is the signature of the thirteenth-century church, which also added a chamfered plinth all the way round on the outside at or above its own ground level. So the evidence for an early church is indirect, and without too much stress the crypt can be seen as an original construction for Church 4 in the thirteenth century – and just that. But we must persevere, and explore the possibilities, however frail, for the form of an early church, assuming that it existed.

Did Church 1 Run East or West from its One Surviving Wall (F3)?

If the crypt wall (F3) implies an earlier building, we might consider two options: that it ran west from F3 or that it ran east (Fig. 4.3). If it ran west, we will be obliged to fit our early church somehow into the shell of the present crypt, and work out how it was entered. The westward location would give us the satisfaction of agreeing with nineteenth-century assertions that this 'vault' was a chapel of St Columba (see Chapter 1), and would also neatly explain why the present crypt was put where it was. During restoration, it was observed externally that the lower foundations of the north wall set off to meet F3 at right angles (Int. 18). This would mean that the north wall of Church 1 lay deep beneath the present north wall. The east wall (F3) also contained the aumbry, which we could surmise as an early feature, and expect it to have been, then as now, on the inside.

The current *west* wall could be part of the same early church, and indeed they are of similar build (large uncut stones at the base, rising in smaller pieces) except where the later west doorway has burst through (Fig 3.6). However, the east and west walls of the crypt are not parallel; which, if they form part of the same early church, they should be. A wall on the line of the present west wall also presents us with difficulties of access. West of the crypt, the old ground surface in monastic times was at about 17.40m AOD, but the floor of the crypt and the base of its walls lay a good deal lower than that – some 2.40m lower. Assuming that the Church 1 walls were buried no more than a metre into the sandy subsoil, the floor for Church 1 must have lain somewhere between 15m and 16m AOD. If the aumbry was to be above knee height, then the middle of this range is preferred, say 15.5m AOD. If Church 1 ran westwards from F3, therefore, much of it was underground at the time: *it was always a crypt*. It could not have been entered from the west without steps, which would have been required to bring a person down, up to 1.4–2.4m from the old ground surface onto its floor. In this case, it would have been advisable to have the steps indoors, so that water did not pour down them into the church. This, in turn, implies a more extensive building above ground, running at least 2m to the west.

A solution to these problems is given by supposing that the west wall of Church 1 actually lay beneath the east wall of Church 2. This provides room for a flight of steps inside the west wall of Church 1, in the same position as the steps are now, although a shorter flight. This Church 1 is 11.25m long, so, assuming a width of 7.5m (as the present church), this putative Church 1 is in the proportion 3:2 (ratio 1.5), which has some resonance with early practice (see below).

If, on the other hand, Church 1 ran east, then the building would have projected over the churchyard east of the present church. There is a north–south wall, east of and parallel to the east end of the present church, which at first looked promising. But this is only 5m away, has the wrong alignment (strictly north–south) and seems to belong to two burial vaults marked by stone posts.[19] Here the ground also drops rapidly into the valley, so that a church 11.25m long (as above) would surely still show above ground. It would at least have shown itself to antiquaries visiting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who observed the broken remains of eighth-century sculpture at this point (the 'Danish Cross') – but none reports the ruins of a chapel. There is no sign of a doorway in F3 (which in this case would have served as the west wall of Church 1), and we would have to abandon the aumbry as a primary feature, since it would then be on the outside of the building.

It has to be said that neither model offers a winning case; the westward church is difficult to access, and the eastward church requires us to abandon the aumbry. Both models oblige us to propose three additional walls for which we have no evidence.

How was the Church Adapted by the Church-Builders who followed?

The longer story of St Colman's church will be recounted in Chapter 8, but there is some additional circumstantial evidence from the way that the hypothetical Church 1 re-emerged as a thirteenth-century crypt. The last people to see Church 1 reasonably intact were those who built Church 2. If Church 1 ran west, then, we argue, the Church 2 builders would have founded their east wall on its west wall. They could presumably have seen at least this wall, and felt that for spiritual or practical reasons it should form their foundation. When these medieval churchmen added a chancel (to make Church 3), this chancel would have over-sailed the area of Church 1, which we have to assume was filled with earth at the time. This chancel was chopped away in its turn to insert the west wall and steps of the thirteenth-century crypt (see Chapter 8). All this strongly suggests that the existing west wall of the crypt is a primary build of the thirteenth century. It is, therefore, of no consequence that it does not run parallel to F3.

If Church 1 ran eastwards from F3, then at the time Church 2 was built its ruin would have lain partially underground and about 12m away. Church 3 extended its chancel over virgin territory. In this case, the ruin of Church 1 had no attraction for the twelfth-century church-builders, and they ignored it. It was the thirteenth-century builders of Church 4 who rediscovered Church 1 or at least took one of its walls back into commission, rebuilding it and placing upon it their new east end. The implication is that this wall was visible, but the others were not, or were not needed.

Is it possible for one century to avoid a ruin and the next to adopt it? Of course. The monumental mood can change swiftly, so that yesterday's superannuated ruin becomes today's revered heritage. It is not excluded that, having created the crypt, the thirteenth-century churchman created the relics, the aumbry to put them in and the historical narrative to go with them (see Chapter 1). Unfortunately, this thinking aloud does not supply the trump card in deciding which way the early church ran. If it ran west, its north, south and west walls were eventually demolished to make way for the crypt. If it ran east, its east, south and north walls were (or had already been) demolished.

At this point the exasperated reader might be thinking: why on earth does he not just go and look? I agree that such an expedition would be worthwhile, but excavation in a Scottish churchyard is neither cheap nor easily allowable. The excavation would need to be about 20 × 20m in extent to avoid being misled by drains, vaults and other anticipated funereal constructions. It would have to go deep (2m+), since we suspect that the walls were almost entirely demolished before the nineteenth century. It would also first involve the excavation and recording of hundreds of skeletons and the removal of many ancestral lairs. If Church 1 did indeed run east of the present church, there one day, when time and money and permission allow, its traces may be contacted about 2m down.

However, for the time being we have marginally better circumstantial evidence to visualise this lost church underneath the present church of St Colman. It can be hypothesised to measure 7.5 × 11.25 m. Only the interior of its east wall, with an aumbry, is still showing, all the other walls having been levelled to their foundations and buried under later walls. Its west wall might originally have contained the door, and would have been entered at a level of 17.4m AOD. Steps would immediately have taken the incomer down a flight of steps to a level of, say, 15.5m AOD. Alternative entries would have been possible through the north or south walls, towards the east end. The upper part of the east wall at least was above ground level and may have had openings to admit light.

Looking ahead to the demise of the monastery, we can also see that such a structure is consistent with its destined afterlife. The medieval builders of Church 2 beheld a ruin and brought its west wall into service as a foundation. They also gathered up larger pieces of eighth-century sculpture and put them into their foundations. They filled in the body of Church 1, and extended a chancel over the top of it. Or this 'chancel' was itself a broadening of the steps to allow wider access to the older church. In due course, the later thirteenth-century-builders of Church 4 took the whole of the ancient foundation, which they could still see, into their new design, making of it a crypt that has survived to this day.

What Form did the Church Take?

I end this chapter with a brief evocation of the kind of architecture that other studies might lead us to expect. Early Celtic church buildings survive in greater numbers in Ireland than in Scotland and have been the subject of more comprehensive

examination. Traditionally, the sequence begins with circular 'cells' in drystone corbelling, as at Skellig Michael, which are adaptations of Iron Age buildings – brochs and wheelhouses. The earliest churches were seen as rectangular versions of these: corbelled drystone constructions on a rectangular plan, as the Gallarus oratory, with a small door at the west end and a square-headed window in the east wall. By the eighth century the church was more clearly rectangular in plan and used mortar as well. Chancels were added in the ninth–tenth centuries, connected to the nave by arches, as at St Kevin's, Glendalough, and this scheme endured until the twelfth century.[20]

More recent studies have questioned some of this sequence. Peter Harbison thought that the Gallarus oratory could be as late as the twelfth century, and the comprehensive review by Tomás Ó'Carragáin has emphasised that differences in construction can be regional rather than chronological.[21] Five types of pre-Romanesque church were distributed in different parts of Ireland, and all were significantly absent from Ulster. Ó'Carragáin's survey confirmed several features as generally diagnostic of Irish pre-Romanesque churches: all were constructed with plinths, building blocks are large, and spalls (stone chips) are uncommon; the door is always in the west wall, most early churches have a window in the south wall, but a significant minority were lit only by an east window. *Antae* (external projections on east or west walls) occurred in 89 per cent of his drystone Type 1 churches. Six out of nine aumbries occur in his Type 2 churches (early mortared). All pre-Romanesque churches appear to be designed as single-room rectangular buildings.[22] Single-phase bicameral churches are very rare.[23] However, corbelled drystone beehive huts and clachans need not be indicative of an early date but may be adopted in the eighth–tenth centuries. Their use was in deliberate contrast to the sacred character of churches.[24]

On the Irish model, an insular church of the sixth–ninth centuries would, therefore, have been single cell, rectangular, drystone or mortared, corbelled or roofed with timber beams, with a west door and an east or south window, may have had antae and could well have had an aumbry. Early churches in Ireland could remain ruinous for long periods. On the practical side, their rubble construction did not lend itself to recycling in coursed walls, but ideologically the interior of a roofless chapel did attract burial in the Middle Ages and later.

Early upstanding churches are rarer in Northumbria and France, but both these areas feature early crypts or partially subterranean constructions. In France the best-known examples are the Hypogeum of Mellebaude at Poitiers (sixth century), where a crypt was entered by a flight of steps flanked by ornamented side walls, and the crypt at Jouarre (seventh century). Both these subterranean buildings were dedicated to burial. In Northumbria, an early church could be provided with a lighted crypt by half-burying it in a hillside, as at Lastingham. More formal crypts with two flights of steps to provide circulation were constructed at Hexham and Ripon. These are associated with the need to provide protected public access to relics, as developed in Rome. Thus a sixth–eighth-century church, drawing on French or Northumbrian models, could already have included the idea of a crypt, especially to house a special relic.

The evidence for early churches in Scotland itself has been beset by poor dating and confused by documentary expectations. These latter suggest that early constructions would have been in timber, wattle at first and then in oak board from the early eighth century, as at Iona, while (following Bede) after 710 churches in Pictland would have been constructed in stone (*iuxta morem Romanorum*).[25] The difficulty is that no early church building has actually been identified in Pictland and very few in Dal Riada. Scholars to date have been obliged to use the exiguous documentation and a number of basic architectural features to characterise early church buildings. Among these were rubble construction, simple rectangular naves, with or without square chancels, monolithic-head windows and doorways with inclining or converging jambs. Beehive cells and rectangular chapels are found in the west – for example, at Eilean an Niaomh. The remains include chapels 20 × 12ft (5 × 3m) with simple lintel head windows.[26] The chapel at Skeabost, Skye (also said in the *Origines Parochiales* to be dedicated to Columba), is 21ft (6.4m) long and has a flat-headed window 2ft high and 6in wide (61 × 15cm) in the east end. The west end is blank.[27] Some indication of how architecture arrives into the Romanesque period might be given by St Oran's Chapel Iona, which is supposed to have been built by Queen Margaret about 1074. Measuring 30 × 16ft (9.1 × 4.9m) internally, it has two narrow windows near the east end, but no window in the east wall, and a west door with a Norman arch.[28] Also on Iona, the early church at St Ronan's (eighth–twelfth centuries) was unicameral, clay bonded and whitewashed.[29]

The church on Egilsay, Orkney, has a nave, chancel and circular tower of a single build in coursed masonry oriented exactly east–west. It has round-arched windows and doors. The date should be earlier than Kirkwall (begun 1137), and may be as early as 1000, given resemblances of the tower to that at Clonmacnoise. The place name Kirkwall implies that Norsemen found a church already there. The church on the Brough of Birsay features a nave, chancel and apse, all apparently built at the same time, with stair turrets in the corners of the chancel arch; it is assigned to about 1100. That on the Island of Wyre, Orkney, is probably from the twelfth–thirteenth centuries, as is Linton Chapel, Shapinsay.[30]

Similar touchstones for second millennium churches can be found further south. At Birnie, in Moray, the Norman east–west church is built in dressed freestone masonry, and was constructed before 1184 as the first Bishop's seat (Moray). The Bishop's seat subsequently moved to Kineddar, then Spynie, then Elgin. The church also contains a very rare and interesting specimen of the ancient square-shaped Celtic bell, which may possibly indicate that the present church was preceded by a Celtic monastery.[31] Two other extant churches may include fabric of MacGibbon and Ross's 'Celtic' period: Monymusk Church, findspot of the Monymusk Reliquary, and Lybster, Caithness. The latter has a nave 17ft 10in × 10ft 11in (5.4 × 3.3), in which the north wall is 3 degrees south of true west and north of true east, supposing the variation to be 24 degrees west of north. North and south walls are 3ft 11in (1.2m) thick, and west and east walls 4ft 2in (1.3m) thick. It was constructed in irregular courses, has a west door with inclined jambs and a slab lintel. The chancel has been added or rebuilt, and was entered by a doorway with a form like the west door.[32]

The debate in Scotland has continued to swing this way and that. In 1986 Eric Fernie showed that Scotland's prime candidates for early churches (those surviving at Abernethy, Brechin, Egilsay, Restenneth, Edinburgh Castle and St Andrews) may all be dated *c.* 1090–1130. He finds the variety in their structure to be typical of this period and notes architectural references to both Ireland and (at Egilsay) to the North Sea lands. In 1994 Neil Cameron suggested that there was a well-established tradition of stone church-building before the twelfth century. In general, he means the eleventh – for example, the foundations at Birsay attributed to the church built *c.* 1060 for Thorfinn, Earl of Orkney. But, as he points out, the monolithic stone arch from Forteviot implies that building churches in stone must have been achievable in Scotland in the eighth–ninth centuries.[33]

It is interesting to compare the ratio of length to width in the earliest of the churches collected by MacGibbon and Ross (Table 4.1). It can be said that those that are undated, but expected to be early, have ratios around 1.5, while those that are known to be Romanesque have ratios larger than this. The ratio of length to width may thus provide a crude indication of early date.

These thoughts provide us with some comfort that a partially subterranean Church 1, measuring 11.25 × 7.5m and pre-echoing the present crypt, would not have been out of place in the Ireland or North Britain of the eighth century. Following the Irish tradition, it would probably have had a door in the west end and a window in the south or east wall, and an aumbry might well have been a feature of such a church. Following the Northumbrian tradition, it might have been cut into the side of a hill, with the west end subterranean and the east end lit by natural light, and entered by a less perilous south door. Some kind of drainage arrangements

Table 4.1 *Length/width ratios of some early churches from external measurements*

Site	Length (ft)	Width (ft)	Length (m)	Width (m)	Ratio
Portmahomack Church 1			11.25	7.5	1.5
Portmahomack Church 2			12	8	1.5
Skeabost, Skye	21		6.5		
Howmore, South Uist	17ft 7in	11ft 6in	5.4	3.5	1.5
Tigh Beannachadh, Lewis	18ft 2in	10ft 4in	5.6	3.2	1.75
Dun Othail, Lewis	17	11ft 3in	5.2	3.5	1.5
St Columba, Balivanich, Benbecula	33ft 6in	14ft 6in	10.5	4.5	2.3
Island of Wyre, Orkney	19ft 2in	12ft 10in	5.9	4	1.5
Lybster, Caithness	17ft 10in	10ft 11in	5.5	3.4	1.6
Egilsay, Orkney, *c.* 1000	29ft 9in	15ft 6in	8.8	4.8	1.8
Brough of Birsay, *c.* 1100	28ft 3in	15ft 6in	8.7	4.8	1.8
St Oran's Chapel, Iona, *c.* 1074	30	16	9.1	4.9	1.9
Birnie, before 1184	42	18ft 6in	12.9	5.7	2.3

Source: MacGibbon and Ross (1896).

carried water off the roof westwards, implying (since it would have been a lot easier to let it soak away to the east) that it was desirable to collect it, using a timber-lined drain. Judging from its surviving wall, Church 1 was built in good quality pink and blonde sandstone from the Middle old red sandstone beds on the east side of the peninsula, and perhaps using the Geanies quarry, the same stone that was used to make carved stone memorials.[34] The walls were rubble built, with large stones at the base and smaller ones as the wall rose. Then, or on its recommissioning in the medieval period, the wall face was tooled flush. There was no evidence for a timber predecessor. In any case, it may be that, as with the beehive huts, timbering was not chronological in its application, but regional or even ideological. Building in stone was ritually special (as with stone circles), while building in timber was a more secular option. Timber churches, could, on this reading, be expected to post-date the first stone churches, the property of builders for whom ritual aspects had been relaxed.

The number of people who could stand inside this space to say the Divine Office was about thirty, or about twenty kneeling. On the basis of such tentative calculations as have already been made, it was, therefore, probably large enough to house the whole community in prayer together. Such a building could also be used to host the burial of a founder, or a special relic or both. But at this period the aumbry might have found a more appropriate use as a cupboard to guard the Blessed Sacrament – the ritual bread and wine in their containers of precious metal. On the hill outside the church were the burials of centuries, many marked by simple grave markers. By the eighth century, a large cross-slab stood immediately east of this church, with another down the slope towards the lowest point of the valley, and the edge of the monastic enclosure. Another stood looking out to sea at the northern edge of the enclosure, and a fourth at the western edge. All this will be argued in Chapter 5.

The scene on the hill therefore changed with the years. In Period 1 (sixth–seventh centuries) the investment was mainly in cist graves. If there was a church, if there were grave markers then, we have no direct pointers to them. By Period 2 (the late seventh into the eighth century) there was a stone church and the community was increasing in size, to perhaps thirty, and was all male. There were many grave markers. In many burials, stones were placed either at the side or on top of the head. Before the end of the eighth century, there were great stone monuments in place, both around the church at Portmahomack, and on the edges of the Tarbat peninsula that now forms the greater monastic estate. All this was to come to an end, with the workshops burnt, the sculpture smashed, and defenders meeting death at the edge of a sword. The church building was no doubt burnt or ruined at the same time and lay surrounded by the remains of its monuments for up to two centuries. Then the place, respected by a new generation of clerics, who no doubt knew something of its history, was adapted for the parish church of Tarbat. A simple rectangular church was erected to the west of the buried ruin and soon equipped with a chancel. The developments of the thirteenth century, no doubt bolstered by the researches of the monks of nearby Fearn Abbey, included the full revival of the old church building, and its adaptation

as a reliquary church for St Colman, revered hero of the early days of the Christian mission in north Britain and Ireland.

The early monks of Britain and Europe were intrepid and hardy, not so much the contemplative recluse, more the soldier of Christ. Like soldiers, they expected to suffer and took a pride in resisting pain, staying alive and winning. In this context one can perhaps better understand why these groups contained few women, relying as they did on that peculiar form of inebriated obstinacy that is reinforced by male bonding. In this, although they might not have liked the comparison, they bore some resemblance to the Viking war bands who were eventually to displace them. The monks, however, fought with words, and ultimately books.

If the early years at Portmahomack (*c.* 550–650) seem slow, they were probably hard years, and three or four generations were required to evolve from experimental commune to major players. Nevertheless, their skeletons tell us that that these few lived long; the animal bones tell us that they lived on beef and, presumably, on the many by-products of cattle: milk, blood and marrow. Plough pebbles, ard marks and a deposit of grain in a lined drain also say that arable cultivation was practised. The territory of the community was marked out by a modest enclosure ditch (the inner enclosure ditch, F176/F179). No doubt trips were involved: back to Iona or even to Ireland. But, if so, it was hardly via an arterial route: although pottery imported from the Mediterranean and then from southern France was reaching Christian establishments all around the Irish Sea in the sixth and seventh centuries, not so much as a sherd has turned up at Portmahomack in ten years of digging. The nearest that this particular commodity reached is Craig Phadraig (near Inverness). By the eighth century this pottery was no longer in circulation, so it does not work as a sign of networking.

Our first period thus features a small group, living relatively long, without imports or commodities, needing little and making less. Perhaps many communities of this kind lived and faded, in an undemonstrative fashion, in which case they will be very hard to find. But not Portmahomack; here the development of the site in the eighth century was to be massive and high profile. Large buildings were erected beside a paved road, and a community of craftsmen sprang into being: carving stone, making church vessels – and preparing vellum for gospel books. The community had risen from its knees and decided to address the world.

Notes

1. A dun or small hill fort at Easter Rairiche. See Chapter 9 for the argument for the early form of the peninsula and the broader prehistoric landscape.
2. From context 1384, the buried soil beneath the monastery in Int. 14, Sector 2.
3. The stone ball came from a secondary context and thus could be a collector's piece – cf. the impressive collection gathered at Dunrobin Castle Museum across the Dornoch Firth. The best study of the balls is still Marshall (1977; updated in Marshall 1983). Mark Edmonds (1992) reviews the possibility of a regional symbolic use in his article entitled 'Their use is wholly unknown'.
4. Davidson (1946: 30).
5. E.g. the ard marks under the late Bronze Age soil at Old Scatness are criss-cross (Guttmann *et al.* 2004: 55).

6. Distribution of plough pebbles along terrace wall in context 2701; turf building material, originally cut from an old ploughland and dispersed from use in walls and roofs (e.g. context 2649, towards the end of the metal-working debris sequence).
7. For Mine Howe, see Card and Downes (2003: 16–17). See Hunter (2007) for the proto-Pictish gap.
8. Sarah King in Field Reports, vol. 7.
9. As suggested by the women's cemetery at St Ronan's on Iona (O'Sullivan 1994: 360).
10. *NSA* 460.
11. Original information from Bob Gourley, Archaeology Section, Highland Council. The bones were obtained for dating courtesy of Daphne Lorimer, Orkney Archaeology Trust. For the dates see Chapter 3. For examples of neighbouring excavated short cists from Aberdeenshire and Edderton, see Ralston (1996). The pit for the Edderton cist measured 1.8 × 1.3m and was constructed of four slabs and capstone about 1 × 0.5m. Human bones within dated to 1680–1430 cal BC. Also information from excavation contractors, courtesy of Jan Dane.
12. Colardelle (1986; 1996).
13. Carver (1987).
14. Holbrook and Thomas (2005).
15. Proudfoot (1996); thirty-eight graves in a circular enclosure on Newhall Point headland across the Cromarty Firth opposite Invergordon included eleven with head support stones, described by the excavator as 'an enduring burial tradition in early medieval eastern Scotland' (Reed 1995: 789).
16. Dalland (1992; 1993). The *floreat* for Four Winds was AD 480–650; for Avonmill AD 400–600. Thomas (1981: 275) says long cists are symptomatic of the Ninianic conversion.
17. Grieg *et al.* (2000: 606, 611). Note dates of long cist burial under a barrow at Redcastle AD 400–560 (Alexander 2005), long cists at Thornybank, Midlothian, ranging between AD 230 and 680 (Rees 2002); and long cist at Innerwick, Dunbar, dated AD 400–660 (Rees and Finlayson 1997). According to Ashmore (2003: 39): 'Burial in long graves and cists occurred throughout much of Scotland from some time between the first and fourth centuries, along with other practices such as burial in short cists and under cairns.'
18. Ashmore (1980); Close-Brooks (1984); at Kilphedir, south Uist, a woman in a cist grave under a square kerbed cairn was dated AD 620–780 (Mulville *et al.* 2003: 25).
19. One is labelled Ross, the other uninscribed, but there are memorials in this lair to the MacKenzie, Corbett and McDonald families
20. MacGibbon and Ross (1896: 9).
21. Harbison (1970); Ó'Carragáin (2003a).
22. Ó'Carragáin (2003a: 90, 102, 45, 87, 76, 74, 80).
23. Hare and Hamlin (1986: 134)
24. Ó'Carragáin (2003a: 140)
25. *HE* V. 21.
26. Ó'Carragáin (2003a: 73–9).
27. Ibid. p. 68, fig. 32.
28. Ibid. p. 220.
29. O'Sullivan (1994).
30. Ó'Carragáin (2003a: 136, 127, 140, 113, 124).
31. Ibid. pp. 220, 218.
32. Ó'Carragáin (2003a: 162)
33. Fernie (1986); Cameron (1994); Alcock (2003: 285).
34. B. Grove, pers. comm.