

## RECENT WORK ON IONA

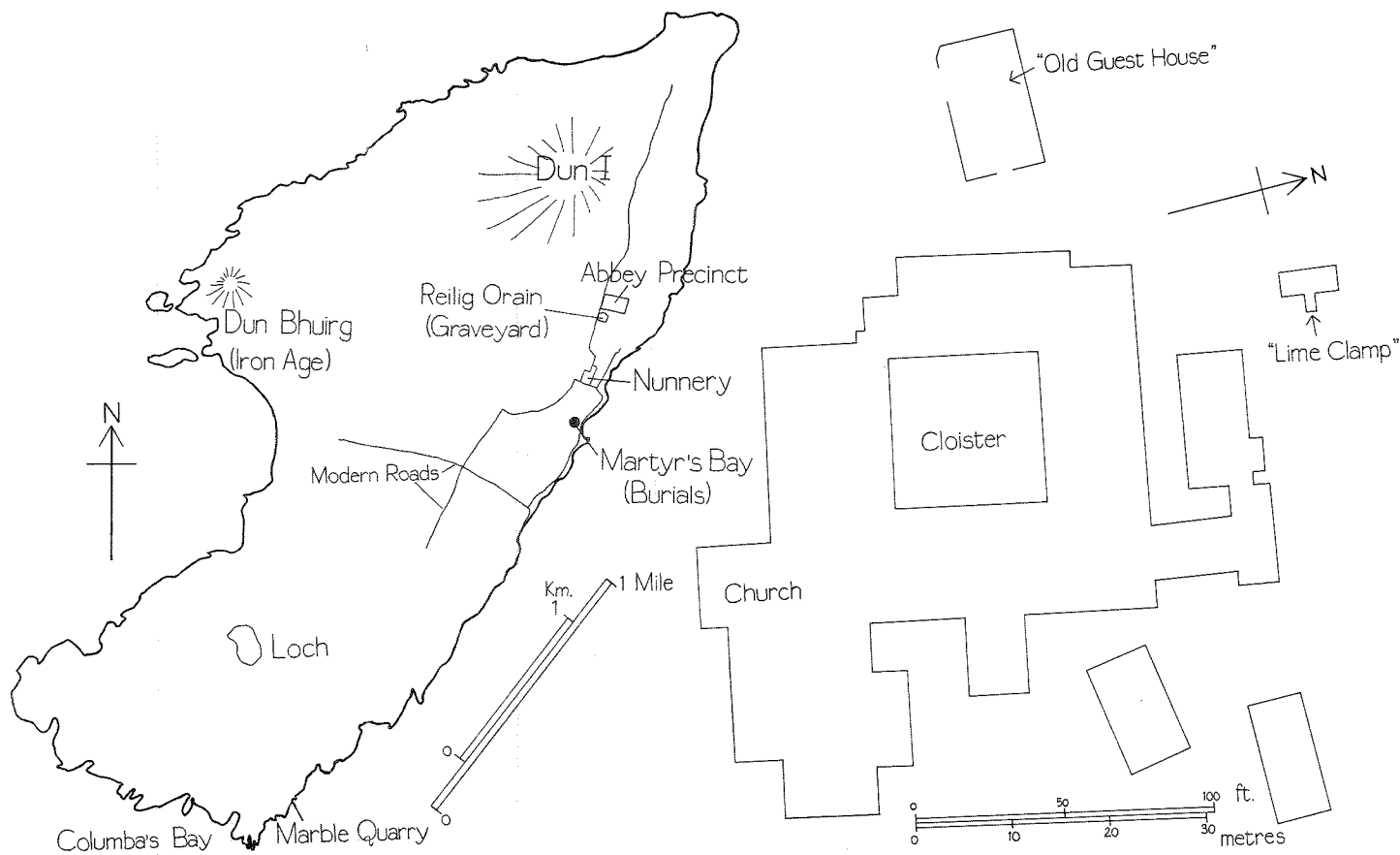
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To set a suitable mood of doom, of which our early monks would no doubt have approved, we can remember that Iona was the first place to be created, and it will be the last place to be destroyed. The first statement approaches hard geological fact, for Iona forms a part of some of the oldest deposits of rock in Britain. The second statement, with its promise of extra seconds before the moment of judgement, goes some way towards accounting for the popularity of Iona in Mediaeval and modern legend.

The island can be described as lying off the western sea-way to the E of Tiree, or some 35 miles from the coast of the Scottish mainland, off the tip of the Ross of Mull. Either way, viewed from Ireland or Scotland, any settlement on the island can be difficult of access, and travel to and from Iona has always needed special effort.

The only evidence of occupation before St Columba arrived in about AD 563 is contained in the small hill-top settlement of Dun Bhuirg (Fig. 1) on the W coast. It must be emphasized very firmly that this settlement has no connection with St Columba's arrival, for it belongs through its pottery and glass beads to the Iron Age culture of the Atlantic coast, and had almost certainly come to an end some hundred years before Columba landed. The motives which led this tribal Irish aristocrat and militant Christian monk, two opposed legacies in one human body, to settle on a small island, much less than half of which was cultivable, have exercised many commentators, but no agreement has been reached.

The subsequent history, through the Viking invasions, the Benedictine period, from about 1190 to 1560, the Reformation, and the Romantic Rediscovery of the Western Isles is well enough known to require no comment. Interest in the archaeological side of Iona began when King Charles I granted a sum of money to repair the church, then falling into disrepair, and the dukes of Argyll later erected a wall round the ruins to keep out animals. The eighth duke of Argyll began the restoration of the Abbey church, and gave it to the Church of Scotland in 1898. Although MacGregor Chalmers, the architect of the restoration, took note of the features under the church our present knowledge of these tantalizing, and probably early, features is poor. The restoration of 1900 therefore



Figures 1 and 2. Map of Iona and plan of Abbey Precincts.

effectively removed a large and fascinating area from the clutches of the archaeologist.

In 1938 Dr George MacLeod (now Lord MacLeod of Fuinary) brought the Iona Community to the site, and the work of rebuilding the conventual buildings was started. By 1964 this work was essentially complete, and further areas had been removed from archaeological consideration. In 1956 Charles Thomas started excavations which I was lucky enough to join in 1959, and inherit in 1965. Finally the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments for Scotland began its thorough survey of the Abbey in 1970, as part of its work on Argyll. Excavation on Iona over the past fourteen years has been eventful, even traumatic, for the many bodies with a concern for the place - archaeological, proprietorial, and religious - have not always been in agreement. I mention this only because I hope and believe that times have changed, for the plans for excavations in the summer of 1973 seem to have the approval and blessing of all concerned. Although one specialist report from my work of 1965 to 1971 remains outstanding, a radiocarbon date for the burials at Martyr's Bay (Fig. 1), I hope that the final report will be ready by the summer of 1973.

Meanwhile, this account of work on Iona from 1966 to 1968 will be concerned mainly with a lime-burning clamp, post holes, and food bones. Even the Venerable Bede, it may be objected, did not consider Iona on quite so low a level. My reason for taking a fundamentally archaeological view is that the history of Iona must be one of the best documented, and most commented on, episodes in early British monasticism. The voluminous notes with which Bishop Reeves enriched his edition of Adamnan's life of St Columba ensure that scarcely any material reference escapes us. The historical picture is before us; the archaeological picture, which must not be confused with it, needs building.

A first concern must be one of dating. On the positive side lies one piece of imported Mediterranean pottery - red slipped ware - which Dr John Hayes dates to 550 to 600 and regards as a reasonably 'fresh' arrival on Iona direct from North Africa (1972, 422). This was found in the undisturbed humus which had accumulated above the lime clamp, and it suggests a date of 550 to 650 for that feature. The food bones and the post holes have to be dated stratigraphically (see p.42 and Fig. 5), but there is one general point of negative evidence worth noting here. Apart from the one sherd of red slipped ware no sealed deposit yet thought to be pre-Viking in date has produced any pottery. Grass-tempered sherds have been found, but,

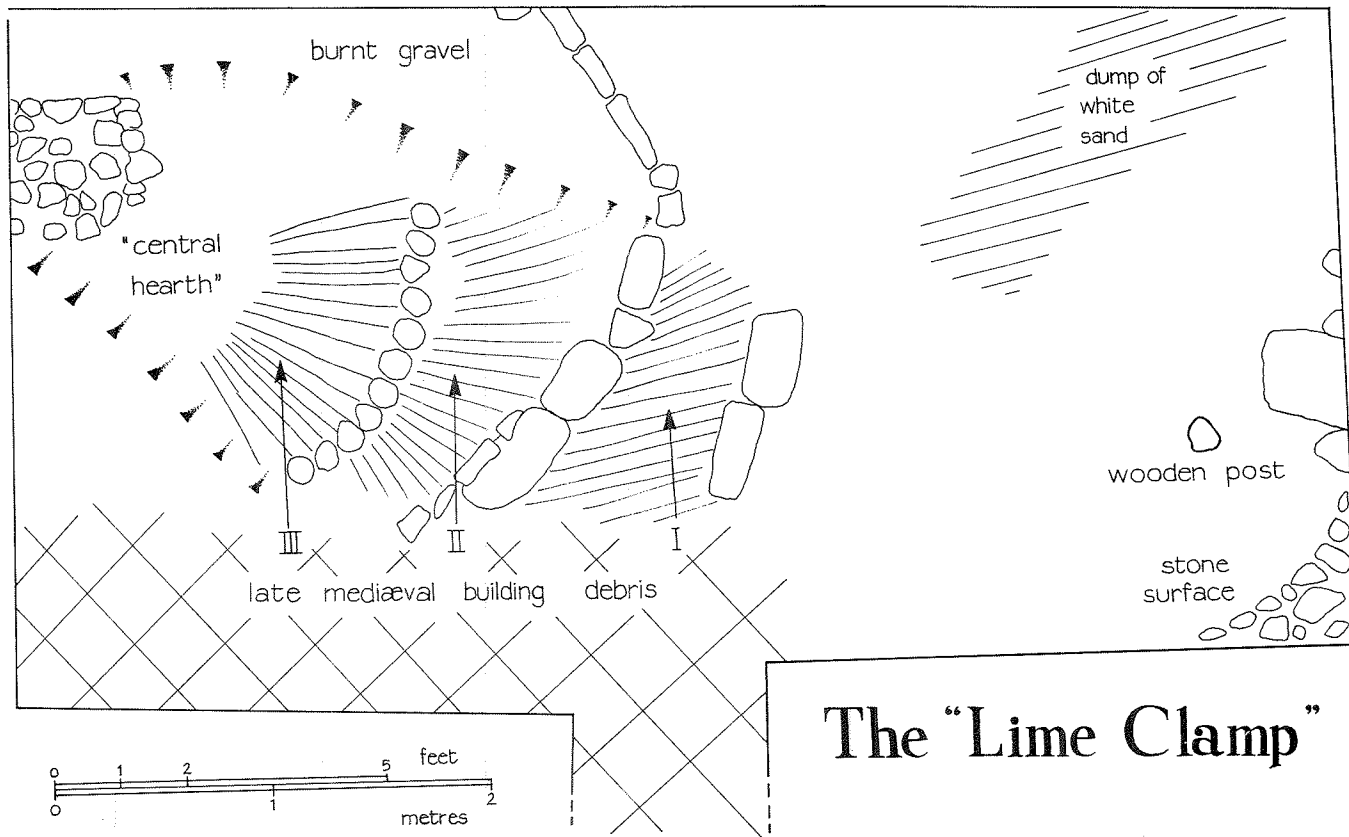


Figure 3. Iona; the 'Lime Clamp'.

in my own excavations, these have always been either unstratified, or above the early levels. It is necessary here to enter a tentative disagreement with Professor Alcock (1971, 200) who sees grass-marked and grass-tempered wares as current in Western Britain from the sixth to the tenth centuries. I would prefer a scheme in which the grass-tempered wares of late Roman Britain filtered west, to die out in the sixth century; and a completely separate phase from perhaps the tenth to the twelfth century spreading from the Western sea-way. The work of Mr Iain Crawford on North Uist (1972) has encouraged me in this speculation, and I therefore work on the assumption that Iona missed the sixth-century remnant of grass-tempered pottery but participated in the second phase up to about 1200.

The two sites to be described lie to the N and W of the Benedictine Abbey (Figs. 1 and 2). The lime clamp was found during excavations in advance of new building, but as the new building has risen on another site, the lime clamp remains intact. In the black sandy soil which had accumulated over the clamp after its disuse was found the sherd of imported pottery already mentioned. The clamp (Fig. 3) could never be cleaned well enough for photography since it was never free of standing water, but the plan represents the main features accurately. Around a central area of strong burning lay three rows of stones of which the earliest (I) was the least complete. Associated with each quadrant was a burnt surface consisting of charcoal with lumps of fused sand. During excavation the feature was variously interpreted as belonging to the working of glass or of some metal. Dr R. F. Tylecote's advice and assistance removed these possibilities, and I have now fallen back on the suggestion by the late Duke of Argyll, on his visit to the site, of lime burning. This interpretation has been strengthened by Dr M. H. Battey's analysis of the fused sand, and by analogy with other similar lime-burning structures discussed with me by Mr Brian Dix (cf. Bushe-Fox, 1932, 36-8, pl. xlv). The dump of 'white sand' lying beside the clamp now makes good sense, for such sand on Iona consists mainly of crushed shell (calcium carbonate) which should 'burn' to form lime (calcium oxide). The site therefore seems to be a burning area where layers of charcoal and shell sand were built up into a clamp with a rough circular containing wall of small boulders, the firing of which would provide a pile of fresh quicklime accessible as soon as most of the containing wall had been removed. As the clamp was placed directly on the natural sand, which has an appreciable iron content, the surface fused to give lumps which suggested an iron 'slag'. I assume that the peaty nature of the soil on Iona provides a suitable motive for lime

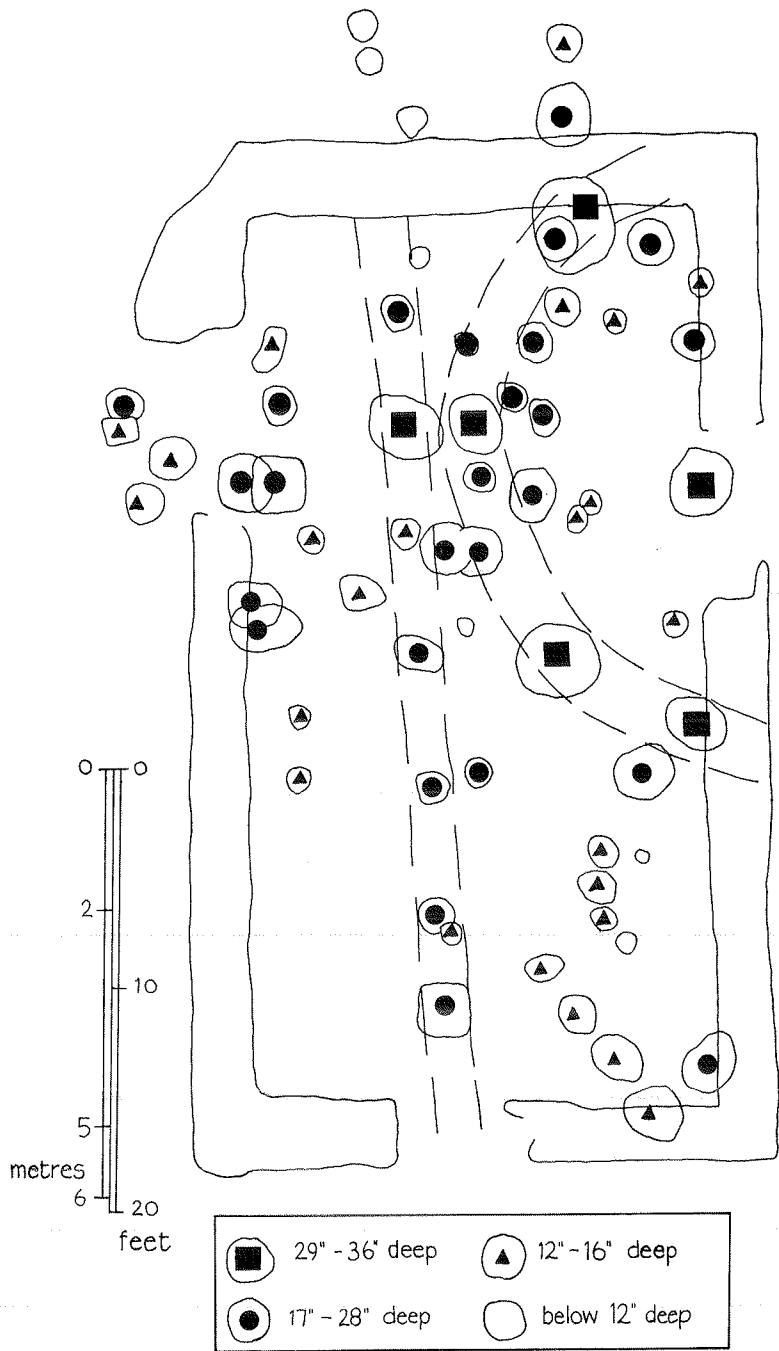


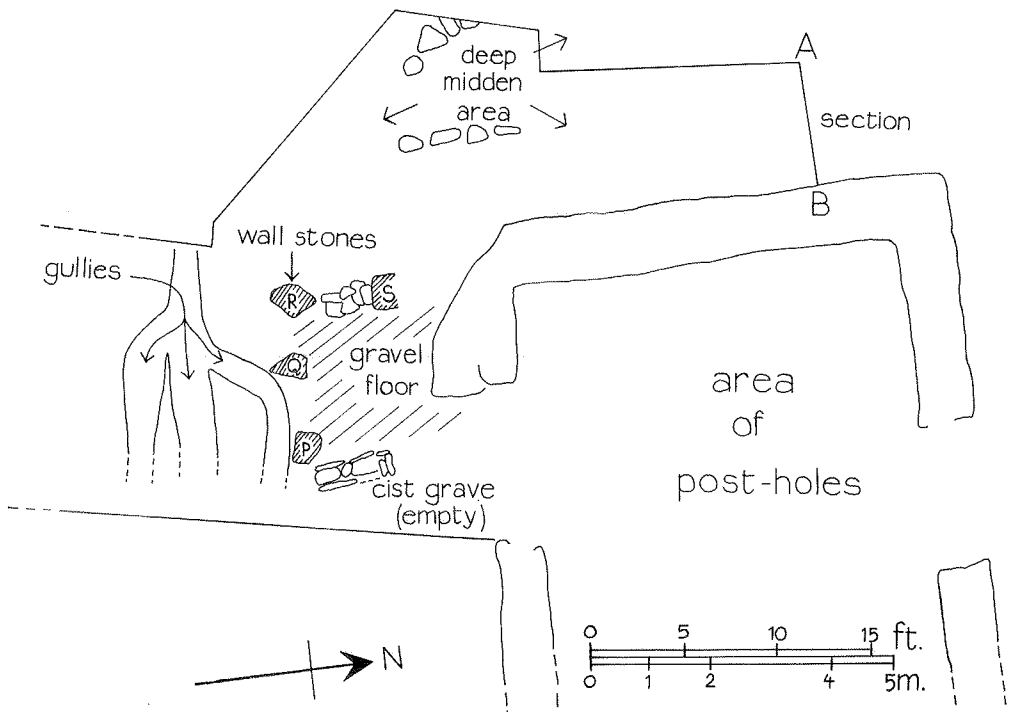
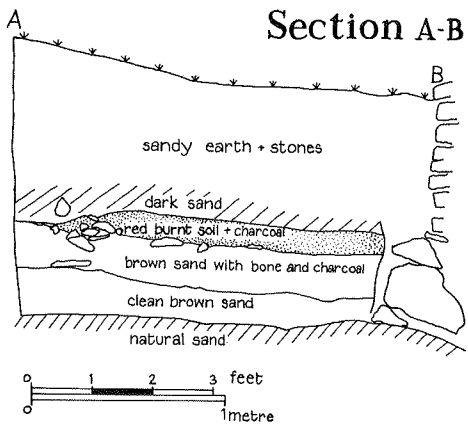
Figure 4. Iona; the 'Old Guest House'.

burning so that there is no need to erect a cluster of hypothetical *Candidae Casae* needing a yearly coat of whitewash.

A second projected site for the same new building mentioned above was the ruin sometimes called the 'Old Guest House' (Fig. 2). This site was fully excavated in advance of construction, but since the site of the building was changed yet again, the ruin remains. Beneath what proved to be the bakehouse and brewhouse of the Benedictine Abbey was a complex collection of post holes (Fig. 4). It was extremely disappointing that when the twelfth century material had been removed none of the various techniques tried could demonstrate any difference at all in the fillings of the post holes, or in the deposit around them. No floor surfaces of the buildings of which they were presumably a part had survived, and no sequence or plan could be built up except where the filling of one hole cut that of another. A fragmentary reconstruction has been attempted by linking some post holes of the same depth (Fig. 4), but all that can be suggested is a part of one circular, and a part of one linear, construction.

The dating of these post holes is tolerably certain from the lack of later mediaeval finds and the sequence established in the section AB just to the W of the ruin (Figs. 5 and 6). The post holes were dug into the natural sand, and were filled, and overlain, with clean brown sand. In the area of the section a later accumulation of sandy debris had gathered, and this was capped by a layer of intensely burnt material. On top of the burnt material were a few sherds of grass-tempered pottery, otherwise featureless, and two shallow post holes. All these layers were cut by the trench in which the bakehouse wall was founded in the twelfth century, and they are therefore earlier. If the grass-tempered pottery and the shallow post holes have to fit between evidence of burning and the twelfth century I suggest a date of AD 1000  $\pm$  150, and it seems unreasonable to avoid calling the burnt debris 'ninth century destruction'. The food bones and earlier post holes therefore belong in the period AD 563 to 800.

The animal bone layer shown in section AB was followed back in the next season to the 'deep midden area' (Fig. 6) which was then excavated. A true monastic and ascetic reaction to this material came from Professor Cramp when she visited the area under excavation; the volume of bones resulting from joints of cattle and sheep made her draw immediate comparisons with her own monastic sites, from which Iona most certainly did not benefit. The bird bones suggest the presence in the monastery of domestic hens and geese, but both species are poorly represented. Some seabirds



Figures 5 and 6. Iona; the 'Old Guest House'.



were apparently caught for food - shags, shearwaters, and gulls; but the presence of bones of the golden eagle presumably derive from the killing of a predator. Shellfish include limpets, winkles and whelks, all of which could be gathered on the sea-shore, but a number of oysters suggest more determined collection in deeper water. The size of fish bones, mainly cod and hake, suggest fairly extensive fishing expeditions out to sea, perhaps bringing in fish up to 26 lb in weight. But the great bulk of food debris came from joints of red meat.

Cattle provided at least 364 separate joints to the community whose refuse tip this was; the lower levels showed a strong preference for prime cuts of beef, while the later, upper, levels seem less luxurious. Haunches of venison followed prime beef in popularity, but sheep, pig, and goat were less common. Seals were common in the earlier levels, but seem to come in two categories - very young, and therefore snatched from a rookery, or very old, and therefore caught whilst dying on the sea-shore; neither category gives a favourable impression of the community as hunters. One seal pelvis has been the subject of a special study by Dr Calvin Wells who has detected a primary wound due to a pointed projectile, followed by infection, protracted resistance, eventual death, and final cooking. The consumption of elderly dolphins and stranded pilot whales is also attested.

The dating of this deposit is of some interest. I suspect that it belongs to the later years of the eighth century since the upper levels are mingled with the burnt debris which has been assigned to ninth century destruction. An attempt to shield the good name of the monks could have been made by ascribing the food bones to invading Vikings living for a time off the community's draught oxen and other domestic animals were it not for the fact that Miss Noddle has specifically noted that most individuals were killed off in their fourth year - excellent for eating, but too young for labour.

Mention must be made of a rectangular building with stone footings and a gravel floor (Fig. 6) which post-dates the wooden buildings mentioned earlier, but ante-dates the bones and burning. My feeling is that the building belongs much nearer in time to the latter, and may therefore date to the eighth century. Four regularly spaced stones, P, Q, R and S seem to form a rectangular corner round the gravel floor, but between P and where the stone opposing S might be expected is a small structure made of slabs of mica schist. Although the southern slab is missing the dimensions are secure because the sub-soil shows no evidence of disturbance beyond the existing S end. The dimensions, especially the length under 4 ft, and the

N-S line make it very difficult for this structure to be a grave - yet a well made cist grave is what it most resembles. I leave it, together with the building of which it seems to be an integral part, for future comment.

Early Iona finishes, at present in a layer of burning, yet there are more pleasant aspects on which to end. The illumination of the Book of Kells is usually ascribed to the years around AD 800, although the place at which it was done varies from Ireland (Mlle Henry) to Northumbria or E Scotland (Professor Brown). Each swing of the pendulum between the extremes passes through Iona. The parts of five early sculptured crosses which still remain on the island are firmly located in space, but their dates of carving vary considerably in time. I have yet to find a motif on one of the crosses which does not appear somewhere in the decoration of the Book of Kells, and this gives me leave to put all the artistic creations of Iona back before the disasters of the early ninth century.

With the transfer of the governance of the Columban community of monasteries to Kells in the middle of the ninth century Iona seems archaeologically abandoned, so that I see the Abbots listed in the Annals of the ninth and tenth centuries as misty, titular, figures. The only spot which flourished was the Releig Oran, the burial ground, which made the island a place of importance up to, and beyond the establishment of the Benedictine Abbey in the later twelfth century. It is appropriate to let the Last Things end this survey.

In compiling this short summary I have drawn on the specialist reports prepared for the final publication of the excavations by Miss Barbara Noddle (animal bones), Mr D. Bramwell (bird bones), Mr Alwyne Wheeler (fish bones) and Mr F. Woodward (shellfish), as well as on many discussions I have had with Professors Charles Thomas and Rosemary Cramp, Mr David Russell, and Mr Iain Crawford. I have adapted my illustrations from my detailed site plans, which were drawn by Peter Baker, and my adaptations were redrawn for publication by Robert Downey. The excavations all took place at the request of the (then) Ministry of Public Building and Works, and the Abbey Trustees, and were financed by the Russell Trust. Year by year the Iona Community has welcomed a changing, but ever motley crew of excavators into its midst, survived the dust and disturbance, and always encouraged us to return; however sceptical some of the workers may have been, all have been grateful for the chance to investigate Iona - both ancient and modern.

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