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Taken into State care: 1972 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2004

**HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

KEILLS CHAPEL AND CROSS



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.

KEILLS CHAPEL AND CROSS

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Built in the late 12th or 13th century, Keills Chapel houses an important collection of sculpture. Although the majority of stones are late medieval graveslabs carved in the distinctive West Highland style, there are five stones of early Christian date, the most significant of which is the Keills Cross, a freestanding high cross of 8th century date that stood near the chapel until 1979 when it was moved inside to ensure its preservation. In form and execution, the cross is similar to the crosses on Iona. This is the only cross of its type to be found on the mainland.

Dedicated to the Leinster saint Abban moccu Cormaic, the church served the parish of Knapdale until 1734 when it was subdivided into the parishes of North and South Knapdale. However, it is unclear whether the church remained in use until this time. By the early 19th century, the church was roofless, and it is described as a ruin by the New Statistical Account (NSA) of 1845. Repairs were undertaken in the late 19th century at the behest of the Marquess of Northampton. In 1974, the Scottish Development Department (the predecessor of Historic Scotland) slated the roof to provide a shelter for the collection of carved stones. Excavations prior to building works revealed several burials within the chapel, including 19th century re-use of medieval chest tombs.

The associated burial ground, enclosed by a 19th century wall, contains many fine post-Reformation headstones and table tombs. Remains of a substantial settlement, indicated by building terraces, lies to the south-west of the chapel, beyond the area in Historic Environment Scotland's care.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

Mid-late 12th century: construction of the church at Keills, and its revenues are subsequently granted by Walter, Earl of Menteith, to Kilwinning Abbey. The grant is confirmed by the bishop of Argyll in 1327, with the bishop's rights and vicar's portion being reserved.

c.1700: Edward Lhuyd visits Keills and produces sketches and transcriptions of several pieces of late medieval sculpture bearing inscriptions.

1734: the parish of Knapdale is subdivided into North and South Knapdale. It is uncertain whether the church remained in ecclesiastical use at this time.

c.1830: Archibald Currie publishes a brief description of the church and its sculptured stones, but makes no mention of the Keills Cross.

1845: the NSA describes the church as a roofless ruin.

Late 19th century: funds from the Marquess of Northampton allow repairs to be made.

1881: descriptions and illustrations of several stones, including the Keills Cross, are published in James Drummond's *Sculptured Stones of Iona and the West Highlands*.

1903: photographs of the Keills cross and other early Christian sculpture are published in Allen and Anderson's *Early Christian Monumental Sculpture of Scotland*.

1974: Keills chapel is taken into guardianship.

1977: excavations within the church reveal that the church was probably built on an existing burial ground, suggesting an early foundation date for the site.

1979: the Keills cross is removed to the church for its continued preservation, and a replica erected in its place. The cross-base and surrounding area is excavated, the results suggesting the cross may have been relocated or re-erected in the recent past.

Archaeological Overview

Keills Church and its sculptured stones feature in many antiquarian accounts and descriptions of ecclesiastical remains in Knapdale and the Western Highlands. The earliest of these are the notes and sketches made by Edward Lhuyd during the visit he made c. 1700. Lhuyd was primarily interested in the late medieval sculpture.

Archibald Currie's 1830 volume *Description of the Antiquities and Scenery of North Knapdale* makes no mention of the Keills Cross, focussing on the late medieval sculpture.

Subsequent accounts feature the cross amongst their descriptions of the sculpture at Keills including JS Howson, John Stuart, James Drummond, and Romilly Allen and Joseph Anderson.

More recently, a series of studies have attempted to set the Keills stones into a wider context examining similarities and differences between different collections, trends and patterns of distribution. These include work by A O Curle (1940), K H Steer and J W Bannerman (1977), RCAHMS (Argyll Inventory vol 7, 1994) and, most recently, Ian Fisher's 2001 monograph on early Christian sculpture in the Western Highlands.

As far as is currently known, archaeological investigation within the PIC area comprises two excavations in the 1970s when the site came into care.

In 1977, the interior of the church was excavated prior to renovation works. Trenches were opened along the east end of the church, a second trench followed the north wall as far as the door, while a third followed the south wall. The results identified three phases of burial. The earliest predated the construction of the church, with one skeleton found aligned east-west beneath the altar. More bones were found in soil beneath the south wall. A second phase was demonstrated as

being contemporary with the building and use of the church. Finally, there were a series of burials within the church up to the 19th century, the latest placed within the medieval chest tombs.

In 1979, the removal of Keills Cross to the church afforded an opportunity to investigate the cross-base and the surrounding area. The excavator, Trevor Cowie, noted that the cross-shaft stood in a sub-circular socket cut into the bedrock, while the oval drystone plinth, visible in earlier illustrations of the cross, was possibly of relatively recent construction. Examination of the cross-shaft appeared to suggest that it had been shaped to stand in a morticed cross-base, a common feature of high crosses of the 8th and 9th centuries. It is possible that the cross may have been moved from another location, possibly in the recent past, but there is no mention of this in the documentary record.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

The church probably dates from the 12th or 13th century, and like many pre-Reformation churches in the Highlands has no division between nave and chancel other than a change in the floor level. Architecturally, the church shows some Norman influences, particularly in the use of round-arched windows.

The walls are primarily rubble, being mostly field boulders with schist pinnings bonded with lime mortar. There is evidence of re-used stonework as a broken millstone and a fragment of dressed masonry for a raised and hollow centre boss are visible. Prior to the restorations of the 1970s, the walls stood to their original height.

Entry to the church is through a door in the north wall, rebuilt in the late 19th century, which is plain in form with a roughly bevelled external lintel. The interior is lit by three small round-headed windows in the chancel, one each in the north, east and south walls, and another in the south wall, opposite the doorway. Each appears to have been altered in the past, probably to allow more light into the church. During the excavations in 1977, the base of an altar was found directly below the window in the east wall.

The present steps at the west end of the church are modern but probably reflect the original means of dividing the internal space.

Sculpture

The sculpture collection comprises 36 stones. Six are of early Christian date, while the remainder are dated between the 13th and 16th centuries. Detailed descriptions are in the RCAHMS Argyll Inventory Vol 7.

Early Christian

Early Christian sculpture comprises four cross-marked slabs, fragments of a freestanding cross and the Keills Cross. A fifth cross-marked stone, documented by Allen and Anderson in 1903, has since gone missing or been destroyed. The slabs bear either Latin or ringed crosses, some of which are decorated using panels of interlace or key pattern, while some also incorporate animals into their design.

The Keills Cross is a freestanding cross of blue slate, and stands around 2m in height. Only one face is carved in relief, while the others are dressed smooth. Panels of spiral ornament, animals and key-interlace decorate the shaft. The lower arm of the crosshead shows a robed figure holding a bible in his left hand, while his right is raised in blessing. On either side are lions, apparently licking a robed figure's head. The scene almost certainly portrays the story of Daniel in the lion's den. At the centre of the crosshead is a raised, circular bird's nest boss with a hollow centre containing three peltae. On either side, the cross-arms contain further lions, while the upper arm shows St Michael slaying a dragon. The use of the raised hollow central boss is paralleled at Kildalton, while the depiction of St Michael on high crosses is well known in Ireland, where the cult of St Michael was well-established in the 8th century.

Late Medieval sculpture

All of the medieval sculpture at Keills is carved in the distinctive West Highland tradition, whose emergence was one of the most important artistic developments in medieval Scotland. Although this style was embodied in a variety of different art forms, it is principally represented in sculptured stone such as the collection at Keills.

The Keills assemblage contains 34 graveslabs, fragments of two freestanding crosses, and what may be a piece of practice carving by a mason. The graveslabs are generally long tapering slabs decorated with a variety of different motifs, such as swords, targes, crosses, domestic tools and panels of plant scroll and interlace. The heads of crosses are usually formed using interlinked ring-knots. Several slabs bear inscriptions, and many of the individuals named appear to belong to hereditary families of craftsmen. One graveslab shows a carpenter's axe, while other craftsmen may be named in inscriptions. There are some similarities between decoration at Keills and other sites. One graveslab bears similar decorative motifs to those at Kildalton and Kilmory Knap.

Five of the various 'schools' of sculptors are represented at Keills, the largest group being those of the Loch Sween 'school' with stones from the Iona, Loch Awe, Knapdale and Kintyre 'schools' also represented, as are stones carved by independent or local masons. The high number of Loch Sween stones suggests Keills may have been a production site, as most of the West Highland 'schools' were attached to churches, abbeys or cathedrals.

Of particular note is a slab bearing a depiction of a late medieval harp, similar in pattern to the Queen Mary Harp displayed in the Museum of Scotland. Although the detail of the carving has degraded, antiquarian drawings show it was depicted along with a long spike, interpreted as a tuning key. Beneath the harp is a small bird perched on a casket, an allusion perhaps to the story of David, composer of the Psalms, the bird being an instrument of divine inspiration. An inscription in Lombardic script, carved along the inner margin of the left-hand edges of the slab, reads: '[...] OCUYNE[D?] FECIT ME FIERI' ('O'Cuinn had me made') and '[HIC] IACEN[T]...ET ALLAN[VS] EIV[S] F[I]L[IVS]' ('Here lies...and Allan his son').

Social Overview

In the absence of any formal studies, it is difficult to determine accurately the monument's social significance. However, the sculpture collection features in several popular archaeological guides for visitors, and has been of longstanding interest to antiquarians and academics.

Spiritual Overview

The monument's present spiritual significance is unknown. However, the church has been the focus for Christian worship for several centuries, and it is highly likely that the surrounding churchyard contains a large number of burials.

Almost all of the early Christian and late medieval sculpture displayed within the chapel originally served as burial markers.

The Keills Cross is an important expression of early Christian belief and, like many of the other sculptured stones, incorporates religious symbolism in its design.

Aesthetic Overview

The chapel stands in an undeniably picturesque setting, overlooking Loch na Cille ('Church Loch'), an inlet of the Sound of Jura.

The reflective atmosphere within the church is well-suited to contemplating the carved stones.

The associated burial ground contains a number of fine post-Reformation gravestones.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

Our understanding of the site's history is very limited, ranging from whether the present church occupies the site of an earlier building and burial ground to when the medieval church went out of use.

There is some doubt as to whether the Keills Cross has a long association with this site.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

The Keills Cross is a significant piece of early Christian sculpture, whose carvings and form shows it belongs to the same group of crosses as those produced on Iona in the 8th century. The use of the hollow boss on the cross-head is reminiscent of Kildalton Cross.

Keills has a long history as a place of Christian worship and burial. Dedication of the church to the Leinster saint Abban moccu Cormaic suggests an early foundation, as he was not a popular patron saint for church builders in the 12th and 13th centuries. Excavations in the 1970s identified a phase of burial at the site prior to the construction of the church.

The West Highland artistic tradition, one of the most significant cultural developments in late medieval Scotland, survives almost entirely in collections of sculpture such as this. The collection of late medieval sculpture is composed of work from five of the significant 'schools' of carving, and includes a small number of inscribed stones and several stones displaying unusual carvings.

Antiquarian drawings show that the harp carving at Keills closely parallels the Queen Mary Harp.

Associated Properties

Kildalton Cross, Islay (produced by Iona 'school', and shares similar decorative features), **Eilean Mòr** (a dependent chapel of Keills dedicated to Abban moccu Cormaic. Small collection of early Christian and late medieval carvings); **Iona Abbey** (production centre for high crosses, and late medieval sculpture); **Kilberry Castle sculptured stones** (large collection of early Christian and late medieval sculpture); **Kilmory Knap** (re-roofed medieval church housing collection of sculpture); Magheranoidhe, Leinster (an abbey reputed to have been founded by St Abban); Kil-Abban Abbey, Leinster (traditionally associated with St Abban moccu Cormaic)

Keywords Abban moccu Cormaic; early Christian; Keills Cross; high cross; Iona; late medieval; graveslab; West Highland; Loch Sween School; craftsman; Queen Mary's Harp