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Last reviewed: 2004

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

KILMODAN SCULPTURED STONES



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KILMODAN SCULPTURED STONES

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

This small but significant collection of sculptured stones lies within an 18th century burial aisle in the south-east corner of Kilmodan parish churchyard. The church, which remains in active use, serves the village of Clachan of Glendaruel, situated in the heart of Cowal. Traditionally, the first church in Glendaruel was founded by St Modan in the 6th century, although the evidence for such a structure has yet to be firmly established. In the 19th century, a site about 1km east-north-east of the churchyard was identified as being St Modan's church, but has subsequently been demonstrated to be a Neolithic chambered cairn.

The stone collection, moved to the newly roofed burial aisle in 1970, comprises eleven sculptured stones from the surrounding churchyard and local tradition states that the burial aisle belonged to the Campbells of Auchenbreck and was probably built prior to 1783.

Housed within the aisle are the weathered head of a medieval cross (reputedly the Cross of Garvie), nine late medieval graveslabs and a post-Reformation graveslab (dated 1636) commemorating a minister of Kilmodan. All but one of the late medieval slabs is carved in the style of the Loch Awe 'school', the decoration including carvings of confronted beasts, swords and plant stems as well as effigies of knights, a cleric and a depiction of a blacksmith's tongs.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

6th century AD: according to tradition, St Modan founds the first church in Glendaruel.

c.1360: the church of St Modan of Glendaruel listed amongst the early prebends of the Cathedral of the Isles.

1783: present church building erected.

Mid-late 18th century: burial aisle built at the west boundary of Kilmodan parish churchyard, possibly for the Campbells of Auchenbreck. A pre-1783 plan of the glebe depicts the building.

1969: Nine late medieval slabs found under turf at Kilmodan Burial Ground.

1970: Sculptured stone collection at Kilmodan is moved to the re-roofed Campbell burial aisle.

1978: Burial aisle and stones taken into Guardianship.

1995: the Kilmodan sculptured stones and burial aisle are Scheduled.

Archaeological Overview

Removal of the stones to the burial aisle has negated any link the stones may have had with their original location.

Given that the lapidarium was originally constructed as a burial aisle, it is highly likely that the structure contains burials beneath the present floor surface. Similarly, the burial ground is believed to have a long history.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

The lapidarium or stone shelter is an 18th century burial aisle, roofed in 1970. Square on plan, the mausoleum is built of harled rubble and was probably built without a roof, the wallhead being surmounted by the ball finials now lying by the doorway.

A piece of stonework of a cross head, reputedly the Cross of Garvie, stands within the lapidarium, although the RCAHMS does not list it in its description of the carvings, regarding it instead as a natural pillar of stone that has been worn to its present shape through use as a tethering post for animals.

Late medieval sculpture

The RCAHMS Inventory of Argyll (volume 7) provides a detailed description of each stone.

Many of the slabs are worn, probably because of long-term exposure to the elements. Each slab is carved in the traditional West Highland style, one of the most important artistic developments in late medieval Scotland. Although it embraced a broad range of art forms (the Guthrie Bell Shrine and Queen Mary's Harp being two examples), sculptured stone remains the best example of the style. RCAHMS notes that eight of the nine stones are the work of the Loch Awe school. Unlike the earlier Iona or Kintyre 'schools', Loch Awe sculpture is the least geographically diverse of any, largely restricted to Mid-Argyll, Lorn and Cowal. The largest single concentration of Loch Awe material is found at Kilmartin parish church, suggesting that this may have been the production centre.

The late medieval slabs bear a variety of decorative motifs and devices that include panels of interlace and intertwined plant stems, swords and tools, including what appears to be a blacksmith's tongs. A range of animals, both real and fantastic, are widely used, often appearing in or adjacent to panels of interlaced plant stems. One slab depicts a deer hunt, another (bearing the blacksmith's tongs) is carved with a unicorn, while a third shows four intertwined animals striking at each other with battle-axes and spears.

Human figures appear on four slabs. Two bear miniature representations of armed men wielding spears and swords, while a third depicts a cleric in prayer. As is typical of Loch Awe sculpture, these figures are set within niches that have dragon-headed gables.

A fourth, locally produced, stone shows a figure of a woman in profile holding a rosary set within a niche. The stone also bears a Lombardic inscription that reads: 'HIC IA[C]ET/ [...] IOHANNIS' 'Here lies...., daughter of John'. At the foot of the stone is a rectangular casket. RCAHMS notes a similarity between the style of carving on this slab and an inscribed slab at Saddell Abbey.

Post-Reformation

A large rectangular graveslab, dated 1636, commemorates Donald McCloy, minister of Kilmodan from 1611 to 1651. The stone has a pronounced roll-and-hollow moulding around its edges, framing an inner moulding. The stone is very plain, bearing a false relief inscription at the top that reads 'MR/D MCLOY/EC, with a large plain rectangular panel beneath and the date 1636, similarly carved in false relief. Records show that Donald MacCloy resigned his ministry on the grounds of old age and the large number of English-speaking lowlanders who were moving into the parish.

Social Overview

As no formal research has been undertaken, it is difficult to accurately establish the social significance of the stone collection. However, the stones feature on several websites about the history and archaeology of the Glendaruel area.

Spiritual Overview

Each of these stones was erected to commemorate an individual or a family, and prior to their movement in 1970, marked a grave.

The lapidarium was originally erected as a burial vault and it is likely that many burials lie beneath the present floor surface.

Aesthetic Overview

The lapidarium stands within a beautiful setting, with the hills of Glendaruel serving as a backdrop. The surrounding churchyard contains many fine post-Reformation gravestones and table-tombs, many of which are well-preserved.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

Although tradition asserts that the burial vault was erected by the Campbells of Auchenbreck, this has yet to be properly established.

The original locations of the stones is not recorded, and therefore the relationship of memorial and grave-site is lost.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

The development of a highly distinctive West Highland style of art is one of the most remarkable aspects of life in late medieval Scotland. Apart from a few rare artefacts, such as the Queen Mary harp and the Guthrie bell-shrine, this rich tradition is represented by monumental sculpture such as found at Kilmodan.

As well as being a valuable source of artistic information, the collection also offers an insight into social status in the late medieval period, demonstrating that craftsmen were sufficiently well-regarded that they could commission professionally carved memorials.

The collection is associated with an ecclesiastical site with a long history, traditionally said to have been founded by St Modan in the 6th century AD.

Associated Properties

Kilmartin churchyard (large collection of similar Loch Awe 'school' carvings, many of which are displayed in a converted burial aisle); **Kilberry sculptured stones** (collection of late medieval sculptured stones); Dalmally (collection of Loch Awe sculpture); Strachur (collection of Loch Awe sculptured stones)

Keywords St Modan; West Highland graveslab; Loch Awe school; post-Reformation; Campbell of Auchenbreck