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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

HILTON OF CADBOLL



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HILTON OF CADBOLL

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Hilton of Cadboll chapel is sited near the shore to the NNE of the modern village of Hilton in the Highland parish of Fearn, at the centre of a natural amphitheatre defined by former sea cliffs. The monument comprises the unexcavated, turf-covered footings of a medieval chapel that stands within a multi-phase, sub-rectangular enclosure. Although there are no gravemarkers, the site certainly contains associated burials and the main enclosure presumably defines a burial ground, although on a different alignment to the chapel. The precise chronological relationship between the two is not known. On the basis of archaeological evidence we know that there are rich sub-surface remains which may extend back to the early medieval period.

Hilton of Cadboll is best known as the find-spot of the eponymous Pictish cross-slab of around 800 AD; the main portion of this is now on display in the Museum of Scotland and, at the time of writing (2004), discussions are ongoing between the Museum and Historic Hilton Trust about the possibility of local display of newly discovered fragments of the rest of the slab.

These field remains are sited within a fenced enclosure, but in fact the guardianship area includes a larger area surrounding this in which no surface remains are visible. In 1999 a local initiative led to the creation of a modern reconstruction of the Pictish slab. With the permission and co-operation of Historic Scotland, this was erected outside the enclosed part of the site in 2000 and additional access to the site was created from the road on the cliffs above. At the time of writing the sculptor, Barry Grove, is working on its completion, informed by the new discoveries from the site.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- The Tarbat peninsula of Easter Ross, on which Hilton is sited, is the findspot of a series of exceptionally high quality Pictish sculptures - at Tarbat (a major Pictish monastery), Hilton of Cadboll, Shandwick and Nigg. The peninsula is well situated with regard to maritime contacts around the Moray Firth. Further S, at Rosemarkie, is another likely major monastery. This concentration of sculpture and monasteries testifies to the presence of a vigorous and wealthy church in this area; it has been suggested that the Tarbat peninsula formed a monastic estate centred on Tarbat. There is therefore the strong probability, enhanced by recent archaeological discoveries, that there was an early medieval foundation of some description at Hilton.
- Late 1500s, Pont indicates a place called 'Abotsheaun' in the approximate location of Hilton.
- The date of the chapel is unknown, but it is presumed to be that described in 1529, 1610 and 1780 as dedicated to the Virgin Mary, although the RCAHMS suggest another location for St Mary's.

- On the basis of archaeological evidence, and a date inscribed on the Pictish cross-slab, in 1676 the Pictish cross-slab which was apparently still standing on the site was cut off at ground level and its cross-face defaced in the process of reworking this for reuse as a memorial to Alexander Duff and his three wives (there is also the possibility that some of the defacement took place in the Reformation, however). The sculpture does not appear to have been removed from the site and was perhaps never used for its intended purpose, since there is allegedly a memorial to Duff at Fearn Abbey. Hugh Miller (1835) memorably describes this as work 'by some barbarous mason of Ross'.
- 1780 The cross-slab is first noted 'near to the ruins of a chapel, which was in an early age dedicated to the Virgin Mary': 'one of the most beautiful of ancient sculpture that has ever been discovered in Scotland'. This led to ongoing antiquarian interest in the sculpture and its recording.
- There is a tradition of the site being used for the burial of unbaptised infants until the end of the 19th century, if not also that of suicides and, possibly, 1832 cholera victims.
- By 1856 the chapel was in use as a shed. Some time after this, and before 1872, the cross-slab was removed by the owner to the gardens of his residence at Invergordon Castle.
- 1921 cross-slab given by owner to present National Museums of Scotland.
- 1978 chapel site taken into guardianship.

Archaeological Overview

- In 1978 a broken font is recorded on the N of the chapel, but the location of this is now unknown.
- Geophysical survey of the chapel and its surroundings in 1997 suggests that there are further enclosures and structures in the vicinity. Other sources, including stray finds of 14th/15th-century pottery, suggest that this may be the site of a medieval village, perhaps Catboll Fisher (first recorded in 1478).
- 1998 Minor excavations by Historic Scotland lead to discovery of carved fragments from defaced cross-slab; it is clear that the cross-slab was defaced on the chapel site.
- Follow-up excavations in 2001 lead to discovery of more carved fragments but also lower portion of cross-slab, *in situ*. This proves that the cross-slab was erected here at one point in its history and that there is the potential to find out more about its early history, as well as the events surrounding its defacement. There is also the potential, given the volume and quality of the surviving fragments, to reconstruct missing parts of the cross-slab. Significantly, the lower portion, still in the ground, is carved on both sides (ie its buried part had

not been defaced in 1676) and exceptionally well-preserved due to its earlier burial.

- Fuller excavations later in 2001 lead to recovery of lower portion of cross-slab and thousands more carved stone fragments, as well as the recognition that the cross-slab had stood in two different places on the same site. On the basis of radiocarbon and optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) dating, the slab seems to have been placed into the later of these settings, where it was found, in the early 12th century. The earlier, undated, setting, only 30cm away, consisted of half of an upper collar-stone with a massive sandstone block beneath. It was clear from the iron-stained sand beneath that this setting had been in place for a substantial length of time. A fragment of the original tapered tenon was found *in situ* at the southern end of this setting indicating that the cross-slab had fallen and broken. It is not known for how long the cross-slab stood before it fell and required to be re-erected. The relationship between the settings and the Chapel wall were partly obscured by the presence of a medieval cemetery, but it is tentatively suggested that the earlier setting pre-dates the building of the chapel. The earlier setting *could* therefore be Pictish in date, although Martin Carver argues the sculpture was first erected somewhere on the cliffs nearby (this is unproven).
- The large cross-slab is not the only sculpture to have been found at the site.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- Little can be said of the architecture of the site since the chapel survives only as footings.
- The site is best known for being the findspot of one of the internationally significant Hilton of Cadboll Pictish cross-slab. The new discoveries mean much more can be said about the form and content of the sculpture that stood on this chapel site. Clear links can be traced with sculpture elsewhere on the Tarbat peninsula and with Insular art in other media, such as the Book of Kells and the St Ninian's Isle Treasure, as well as Continental models.
- The quality and nature of this carving, and indeed its relations in the area, confound popular, if tenacious, notions of primitive Picts.
- The design of the cross-face has been informed by the archaeological discoveries but there are some limitations to the accuracy of the modern reconstruction. The back-face was carved before the discovery of the lower portion. The lower portion of the reconstruction was therefore based on informed speculation. We now know exactly what this looked like, and there are some differences, not least of which is that the original was slightly taller than the reconstruction.

Social Overview

- The discovery and excavation of the lower portion of the cross-slab in 2001 re-ignited an ongoing controversy over the ownership of the cross-slab and where

it should be displayed. A community study by Dr Siân Jones of Manchester University (Historic Scotland 2004 Research Report) was designed to gain an understanding of the meanings and values surrounding early medieval sculpture and the basis of conflict between various interest groups.

- The modern reconstruction, which is not owned by Historic Environment Scotland, is held in great esteem and affection by the local community.
- 'The Park', the open area including the chapel, is regularly used for recreational purposes by locals.

Spiritual Overview

- This is a known medieval chapel site, and seems to have been of Christian significance since early medieval times.
- Local traditions about 19th-century burials are active, and there are understandable local sensitivities about how any human remains from the site are treated. Human remains from the 2001 excavations were officially reburied in the corner of the guardianship area, to respect local wishes.

Aesthetic Overview

- The natural amphitheatre in which the chapel is sited is a most attractive site, with views of the Seaboard villages and Moray Firth beyond.
- The modern reconstruction is imposing and gives a sense of the scale of the original cross-slab.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Post-excavation of the 1998 and 2001 excavations is ongoing. This includes a major art-historical assessment of the cross-slab.
- Much of the sculpture is still missing. The possibility is that some of this was rebuilt into later features on the site. If discovered, this may require further reconsideration of the original form and content of the monument, given that lots of gaps exist.
- Significant gaps in our knowledge relate to the archaeology of the site: what is here, how does the cross-slab fit in to this, what was here in early medieval times, and how does this relate to early medieval activity elsewhere on the peninsula. Place-name and further historical research related to the peninsula as a whole may also be helpful.
- Understanding of the later history and use of the site is also very partial.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- The guardianship site is best known for what is no longer there: it is the find-spot of the Hilton of Cadboll Pictish cross-slab of around 800 AD, one of the finest examples of early medieval sculpture in Scotland. On art historical grounds this is a monument/artefact of national and international significance. The content and quality of the sculpture place it in the mainstream of contemporary European art.
- The guardianship site is an appropriate place to interpret the sculpture since its local context, both past and present, adds considerable meaning to the value of the sculpture, and the value of the place.
- The cross-slab has a phenomenally complex biography, about which we now understand a lot more. This is also a rare instance when we have evidence for the structural setting in which the cross-slab was erected (on two occasions), but our archaeological understanding of the wider setting of the site remains very partial.
- The sculpture links the guardianship site with other Pictish sites on the Tarbat peninsula (and indeed beyond), the suggestion being that the peninsula was the estate of a wealthy monastery. This is evidence for the well-developed nature of Christianity in late Pictland.
- The sculpture here and elsewhere on the peninsula challenges popular misconceptions about the Picts, although local folklore, such as the story linking the sculptures at Hilton of Cadboll, Nigg and Shandwick to the story of three dead Norse princes are rife.
- With regard to the local community, the cross-slab can be seen to: provide a sense of connection with the past; tie the more recent past affectionately to the present; provide an essential reference point in the community's identity or sense of itself; provide a sense of collective attachment to the place.
- The chapel site, and the human remains that it contains, are still respected on religious grounds by some members of the local community.

Associated Properties

The main links are to the Pictish sites and sculptures on the Tarbat peninsula – Tarbat Discovery Centre (run by a local Trust), Shandwick (run by a local Trust) and Nigg – Groam House Museum, Rosemarkie (private museum run by a Trust), and the sites on the Highland Pictish Trail (a Council initiative), such as Edderton. Other sculptures in the wider region include **Knocknagael** in Inverness and **Sueno's Stone** near Forres.

Links art-historically to Historic Environment Scotland monuments include **St Andrews Sarcophagus, Meigle, St Vigean's, Aberlemno, Dunfallandy, Fowlis Wester, St Orland's** and **Ruthwell**.

Keywords Pictish, early medieval, medieval, chapel, Hilton of Cadboll cross-slab, hunting scene, Insular art; international connections, monastic estate, Tarbat peninsula, reconstruction, local community, Highland Pictish Trail