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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

INCHKENNETH CHAPEL



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INCHKENNETH CHAPEL

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Inchkenneth Chapel, a ruined 13th century parish church, stands above a sandy beach forming a convenient landing-place for small boats.

Leaning against the church's west wall are eight late medieval graveslabs, all carved in the distinctive West Highland style. On the south side of the church is a post-Reformation burial enclosure containing a pair of grave slabs, one bearing an effigy of a Maclean of Breolas. The surrounding churchyard has a fine collection of 17th and 18th century table-tombs and headstones and a ring-headed cross of slate dating from the period 1500 to 1560 and erected on its present site in 1926.

Most of the monuments commemorate MacLeans, who owned many of the surrounding islands until the 17th and 18th centuries, although there is a tradition that the Kings of Scotland were buried here if the seas were too stormy to attempt passage to Iona.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

c.1380: The chapel is mentioned as a place of worship by the chronicler Fordun.

1547: As a possession of the Augustinian nunnery of Iona, Inchkenneth was probably among the lands transferred to Hector MacLean of Duart by the last prioress.

1549: While Monroe describes the chapel as a parish church, the chapel may have gone out of use as a regular place of worship around this time. However, the burial ground remained in use until the 19th century.

1773: Boswell and Johnson visit Inchkenneth as guests of Sir Allan MacLean, the ruins and local traditions inspiring Boswell to compose a Latin ode.

1926: Ministry of Works accept Guardianship of the chapel.

c.1930s: Inchkenneth purchased by Lord Redesdale, father of the famous Mitford sisters.

Archaeological Overview

The dedication to St Cainneach (St Kenneth) of Aghaboe, a contemporary of St Columba, suggests there may be an early foundation on Inchkenneth, but there is no physical or documentary evidence for this.

Almost no archaeological works have taken place within the PIC, and the archaeological potential is largely untested although it is likely that the churchyard

contains a long sequence of burials. Clearance work within the chapel in the late 1920s revealed no significant remains.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

Chapel

In form, Inchkenneth Chapel is like many medieval churches in the Scottish Highlands, being small, sparsely lit and simply arranged internally with no evidence for a division between the nave and chancel.

The chapel is constructed of coursed rubble, quarried locally, while the dressings were probably imported from the Carsaig area. As noted above, the walls survive to wall-head level except on the S where they are much reduced. Neither gable stands to full height, being reduced to the level of the surrounding walls. Massive buttresses, probably built in the 16th or 17th century, support the E gable which has a marked outward lean.

The main entrance, situated at the western end of the north wall, is badly damaged, and much of its decorative stonework has been lost. However, the chamfered base mouldings survive to show that it had three orders.

Within the chapel, the division between nave and chancel is marked by a step down. The chancel is lit by four windows, two in the E gable, behind the altar, with a single window in the N and S walls. These latter windows have been altered, their round-headed arches being squared off with lintels. Aumbries exist in the N end of the E wall and the E end of the S wall. At a higher level in the same angles there are projecting stone slabs, interpreted as brackets for lamps or holy images. The nave of the church is almost wholly devoid of architectural elaboration, although RCAHMS considers that there may have been a window in the destroyed section of the S wall.

Built against the S wall of the chancel is a square burial enclosure, containing monuments to the MacLeans of Breolas.

Medieval/post-medieval sculpture

Chapel

The chapel houses eight West Highland graveslabs standing upright and held in place by iron staples. Detailed descriptions of these are published in the RCAHMS Argyll Inventory, volume 7. The graveslabs bear a variety of emblems and motifs, such as panels of interlace, plant scroll and depictions of animals, while at least two have representations of furled galleys. Of the group of eight slabs within the chapel, six are identified by RCAHMS as products of the Iona school, and all are dated between the 14th and 16th centuries. One slab bears the effigy of a mitred ecclesiastic, probably an abbot or bishop.

MacLean burial enclosure

Housed within the burial enclosure are two memorials. Both are described in some detail in the RCAHMS Inventory of Argyll, volume 7.

The first is a large table-tomb with a worn inscription around its edge, and heraldic achievements on its top. Although the inscription is unclear, RCAHMS suggests this to be the tomb of Hector Mór, second son of Donald McLean of Breolas.

The second stone is a headstone commemorating Dame Mary Macpherson, Lady MacLean, and bears the arms of the Macphersons on its front while the rear has the arms of the MacLeans of Duart. Her family were known Jacobite-sympathisers, and she married Sir John MacLean, 4th Baronet of Duart, in 1695 at James VII's court-in-exile at St Germain.

Churchyard

Within the churchyard is a ring-headed cross of slate some 1.48m in height. The cross, described in detail in the RCAHMS Inventory of Argyll volume 7, comprises a Latin cross bordered on each side by a continuous chevron pattern. The front of the cross-head bears a stylised decoration, and at the base of the shaft is a pair of shears and a single sided comb. The rear of the stone is plain and bears no visible ornamentation.

A second effigy lies near the church, carved in high relief and depicting an armed man. However, the dress and gear appear to date from widely differing dates. For instance, the warrior wears an aketon or long quilted coat with an aventail but also a frilled cravat, typically late medieval, while the warrior's helmet is shown with long curled hair more typical of the 17th century. The effigy also bears a targe while one hand clutches what appears to be a cannon ball, and a claymore and dirk are worn on a sword belt. It is likely that the sculptor aimed to copy the earlier West Highland effigies, but incorporated contemporary elements into his work. A similar effigy at Weem, Perthshire, dating from around 1630, shows a warrior with the same type of helmet, sword and targe.

Social Overview

Although no formal study has examined the social significance of Inchkenneth chapel, the site is listed in several popular archaeological guides and websites.

The site is associated with notable figures as diverse as Dr Samuel Johnson, James Boswell and Unity Mitford. Evidently Johnson was so moved by his visit that he composed a Latin ode. Unity Mitford spent much of the remaining years of her life on Inchkenneth after her failed attempt at committing suicide in 1939.

Spiritual Overview

As a former Christian church and a place of burial, the site remains a spiritually significant place. Unity Mitford reportedly held 'religious services' in the chapel.

Aesthetic Overview

Inchkenneth lies in a particularly scenic position near the mouth of Loch na Keal. The island is abundant in birdlife and rabbits.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

With virtually no archaeological work carried out within the Guardianship area, it is difficult to test the tradition of an early Christian foundation on Inchkenneth.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

The collection of late medieval and post-medieval sculpture at Inchkenneth is particularly important as it includes several graveslabs produced by the Iona school, whose work is considered to be superior to other late medieval schools of carving in terms of its quality and detail.

The chapel demonstrates the simplicity of pre-Reformation churches in the Scottish Highlands with its plain architecture and simple internal layout. However, the surviving fragments of the door-surround suggests the church may have had a wealthy patron to commission such an elaborate piece of carving.

The chapel and the burial ground are closely associated with the MacLeans of Duart, and many of their kinsmen are buried within the churchyard. Other notable individuals linked to the site include the lexicographer Dr Samuel Johnson and his companion James Boswell who documented their visit in some detail, and more recently Unity Mitford, who convalesced on the island.

Associated Properties

Kilberry Castle, Kilmartin Churchyard, Kilmory Knap & Kilmodan (similar range of sculpture and site is of comparable antiquity). **Iona Abbey** (centre of production for Iona school sculpture).

Keywords West Highland style; graveslab; effigy; interlace; plant scroll; chapel; Romanesque; nave; chancel; buttresses; burial aisle; MacLean; headstone; Boswell; Johnson; Unity Mitford