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**Taken into State care:** 1928 (Guardianship)

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## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# EILEACH AN NAOIMH



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.



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# EILEACH AN NAOIMH

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## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Eileach an Naoimh (or na h-Eileacha Naoimha), 'Sacred stone buildings/stone buildings of the saints' in the Garvellach islands is the setting for one of the best-preserved examples of an early Christian monastery in Scotland. The island lies to the north of Jura.

Although the monastery is believed to have been abandoned in the 9<sup>th</sup> century during the Norse raids on the west coast of Scotland, the island continued to be a place of pilgrimage and burial, being owned by the Augustinian priors of Oronsay until the Reformation.

Following the Reformation, ownership passed to the Duke of Argyll and tenant farmers are known to have occupied the island for at least part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, although by the early 18<sup>th</sup> century Eileach an Naoimh was being used as pasture for cattle and sheep from a farm on the nearby island of Garbh Eileach. This appears to have continued until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when work on building a sheepfold unearthed human bones. There are well-preserved examples of post-medieval occupation and farming such as a well-preserved corn-drying kiln, a barn, drystone field boundaries (robbed from early Christian and medieval structures) and areas of rig and furrow.

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## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical Overview

**c.542:** according to the Latin *Life of St Brendan*, the saint founded a monastery on the island of *Ailech* in Britain, argued by W J Watson to be Eileach an Naoimh.

**c.1380:** John of Fordun describes the island of Helant-Leneou as a sanctuary, although no mention is made of a church in Monro's description of the island in 1543.

**1637:** tenants of the Duke of Argyll are noted in legal documents.

**1724:** a Presbytery visitation notes no inhabitants on the island.

**1824:** an account of the island notes that although uninhabited, the tenants of Garbh Eileach grazed their cattle on Eileach an Naoimh and used the corn-drying kiln there.

**1890s:** bones unearthed during the construction of a sheepfold within the enclosure are interpreted as from a monastic burial ground.

**1928:** Eileach an Naoimh is taken into Guardianship and a series of restoration works carried out.

### Archaeological Overview

The apparent antiquity of the ruins led many 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars to identify Eileach an Naoimh as the isle of Hinba. In Adomnan's *Life of Columba*, Hinba monastery was founded by Columba and served as the setting for several miracles by the saint. However, this widely held opinion was challenged by W J Watson in the 1920s when he demonstrated that place-name evidence suggested a foundation by St Brendan of Clontarf. In the *Life of St Brendan*, the saint is said to have founded a monastic community in 542 on an island called *Ailech*, which Watson identified as Eileach an Naoimh. This theory is supported by the existence of several place-names associated with St Brendan throughout the Garvellachs.

The monastic community is likely to have been along the lines of that known to have existed at Iona in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, with a cluster of communal buildings enclosed by a ditch or stockade, with an adjoining burial ground similarly enclosed. Outlying cells, such as the double beehive cell, probably offered shelter to anchorites. Today the remnants visible that likely date to this period include the double beehive cell, Eithne's grave with the associated cross slab, the inner enclosure, the subterranean chamber and the upper burial ground with its associated cross-slab. The chapel likely dates to the 12<sup>th</sup>- or 13<sup>th</sup>-century though it may stand on the site of an earlier monastic church; this is far from clear as our understanding of the island's history is hindered by lack of excavation and it is difficult to assess relationships between different archaeological features. There are also remains of a later medieval church and several features dating from the post-Reformation agrarian use of the island.

In particular, it is impossible to test the theory that the monastery was likely founded in the 6<sup>th</sup> century or whether it was abandoned during the Norse raids of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Given that the core of the site was never cultivated, the prospects for preservation of archaeological deposits are probably very good.

### Artistic/Architectural Overview

#### **The Beehive Cell**

Standing to a height of over 3m, the beehive cell is the most tangible and visually impressive part of early Christian monastery. Built on a figure of eight plan, the double cell measures approximately 12.5m in length and is built of local sandstone split into thin slabs. It is evident from the use of mortar that the building was probably consolidated during restorations carried out by the Ministry of Works in 1937.

Both chambers possess an external doorway and are interconnected by a low internal passageway. Part of the corbelled vault of the upper chamber survives, its smooth internal curve achieved by use of oversailing courses and naturally bevelled slabs. The outer surface is less regular in appearance and originally may have been covered by turf; an external scarcement about 1.4m below the top of the dome may have helped to support such a cladding. It is likely that the structure was robbed for building dykes and may have been adapted for use as a byre when Eileach na Naoimh was farmed at some point.

## The Central Area

### a) Inner Enclosure.

At the centre of the monastic site is a large pentagonal enclosure, measuring about 35m in greatest span and bounded to E, NE and NW by higher ground with occasional rock-outcrops. On these sides, there are remains of drystone revetment-walls, and it is likely that to the N the level area has been extended by cutting into the slope. The west boundary is a low turf-covered mound about 1m thick, which extends SSE for 12m from the NW angle, but has been obliterated in the level ground beside the 'monastery'. Within the enclosure are several piles of stone, probably the result of clearance by the Office of Works. A larger stone-heap near the NE angle of the chapel may be the result of earlier clearance of the site, or agricultural field-clearance.

### b) The Underground Cell.

This souterrain-like structure comprises a subterranean slab-lintelled inner chamber, about 1.8m in height, with a roofless, polygonal outer chamber whose floor is around 1m below ground level. The structure adjoins the inner face of the S wall of the inner enclosure. Access is by way of a path paved with large slabs that leads from the entrance of the main enclosure to a flight of steps down to the outermost chamber. An obliquely set stone at the west side of the steps probably marks the entrance-jamb of the chamber, which measured about 2m from north to south by 1.5m transversely. The north wall, which survives to an internal height of 0.9m, shows no evidence of corbelled construction, and it is not apparent how the chamber was roofed. While the doorjambs of the inner chamber are modern, its original lintel remains *in situ*. At floor-level the chamber is circular in plan, with a diameter of 1.4m, except that the north wall is straight, but the upper part of the west wall also forms a straight chord, and incorporates a well-formed aumbry whose sill projects beyond the curved wall-face below. Its original function is unclear, as the chambers may have equally served as storage or as a penitential cell.

### c) Chapel

A small chapel, dated to approximately 12th or 13th century, approximately 6.6m by 3.6m, stands within the central enclosure. Its clay-bonded walls, composed of thin slabs of sandy flagstone, stand to a maximum height of 2.6m and vary from 0.85m to 1.0m in thickness. The upper part of the north wall overhangs internally by about 0.2m, interpreted in the past as evidence for a corbelled vault of Irish type. However, the opposite wall has only a very slight inclination, and it is more likely that the growth of vegetation on the wall-head has caused the north wall to lean to the present extent. Furthermore, the thin side-walls would not support a vault of the suggested height.

Within the chapel there is a sculptured stone; the upper two-thirds of a tapered slab of slate with bevelled edges, measuring approximately 1.21m by 0.56m. The stone has been broken across and is now much worn. The slab is bordered by continuous nail-head ornament within a flat moulding. At the right are remains of a sword and, above the hilt (which has been destroyed), a circle of loose interlace. The remainder of the surface is decorated with a series of plant-scroll forming

circular medallions, imitating a characteristic motif of the Iona school of carvers.

d) Late medieval church

Situated on a terrace about 15m SW of the inner enclosure, this building measures approximately 8.7m by 4.8m. Its walls are lime mortared coursed rubble with sandstone quoins, and are reduced to their lowest courses except for part of the NW wall that still stands to about 2.0m in height. The entrance was at the SW end of the SE wall. Against the NE wall is an annexe, 4.5m by 3.5. This probably served as a sacristy or possibly a post-Reformation burial-aisle. The interior of the church is subdivided by a cross-wall, now reduced to footing-level. The date and purpose of this alteration are uncertain.

e) Building ('the monastery ').

Immediately to the SW of the inner enclosure lies a rectangular building incorporating work of at least four phases, the most recent of which appears to be its conversion into a sheepfold in 1859. During the course of this work, human remains are said to have been discovered and much of the structure was probably rebuilt at this time leaving only two doorways and an aumbry in the outer face of the south-east wall as original features. Although a medieval origin, perhaps as a priest's house, is not impossible, this building probably belongs to the 17th or 18th century, when Eileach an Naoimh was being farmed.

f) The Kiln.

In form, this drystone building resembles the corn-drying kiln on Garbh Eileach and lies approximately 35m NE of the early chapel overlooking an area of former rig-cultivation. The kiln measures 6.2m by 4.0m. The rounded SE end is set into the slope, and its outer face retains a projecting stone, evidently intended as a peg for a thatch-rope, while the NW wall preserves its pitched gable. Two opposed doorways in the side-walls controlled the draught as well as giving access to the interior, which was almost entirely occupied by the platform incorporating the conical kiln-bowl. The kiln is known to have been used in the middle of the 19th century and probably dates from the late 18th or early 19th century.

g) The Barn.

This round-angled building stands in an exposed position at the SE edge of the knoll on which the kiln is situated, some 40m S of the latter. It measures 9.2m by 5.8m over walls about 0.9m in thickness that stand to a maximum height of 1.8m. Opposed doorways in the side-walls provide a through-draught sufficient for winnowing. Two pairs of slots in the side-walls formerly held the lower members of the cruck-framed roof, which was probably of hipped form. The drystone masonry resembles that of the kiln, and this building may be attributed to the same period. There are turf-covered remains of a small annexe 2m to the NE.

h) Funerary Monuments

Rectangular slab of local flaggy sandstone containing numerous small pebbles, 0.70m in visible height by 0.53m width. The E face bears a cross with expanded terminal incised with a wider and deeper groove than that at Eithne's Grave (NM60NW 4). The horizontal and vertical arms are of almost identical length but their intersection is raised a little above the mid-point.

### Social Overview

Insufficient evidence exists to assess the monument's current social significance. However, the monument features in several popular archaeological guides for tourists. On a recent trip there were several groups of people visiting the monument in one day; it seems to be a popular stop for sail boats, kayakers and people from the neighbouring islands who have access to boats.

### Spiritual Overview

Eileach an Naoimh is associated with St Brendan the Navigator, who reputedly founded the early Christian monastery, and is traditionally the burial place of Eithne, the mother of St Columba. In the middle ages the island was a place of pilgrimage and burial. The present religious significance of the island is unknown, though it undoubtedly has a numinous quality similar to Iona.

### Aesthetic Overview

Eileach an Naoimh is reached by boat from Tobarlochy on Luing, or from the Crinan harbour and it is possible to see the famous Corrievreckan whirlpool en route. Visitors have noted a variety of wildlife sightings including seals, porpoises and a wide variety of seabirds. The underwater wildlife round the island is known to be rare and of high significance.

The solitude of Eileach an Naoimh offers visitors an opportunity to experience at least one aspect of eremitic life.

### What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Although tradition strongly associates the island with St Brendan, this remains untested archaeologically.
- Very little archaeological work, other than the RCAHMS survey, has been carried out on the island, making it difficult to determine the extent of the early monastery or when it might have been abandoned.
- Further research, for example in the Inveraray Castle archives could help illuminate the post-medieval use of the island, and pinpoint exactly when it became uninhabited
- Lidar survey could help determine the extent of the monastery and any earlier/later structures

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## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key points

- Traditionally founded around 542 by St Brendan the Navigator, Eileach an Naoimh is one of the best preserved early-Christian monastic sites in

Scotland as its remoteness has prevented the monastery from been significantly damaged by subsequent occupation.

- The monastery is likely to have been abandoned c.800 during the Norse raids on the west coast of Scotland, but the island became the property of Oronsay Priory until the Reformation.
- The most obvious remnant of the early monastic period of occupation is the unusual double beehive cell as well as the grave-enclosure traditionally associated with Eithne, mother of St Columba, and a series of larger enclosures or burial grounds.
- Eileach an Naoimh has significant post-medieval farming remains, including a byre, a possible farmhouse and a corn-drying kiln as well as cultivation remains. Documentary evidence notes farming on the island from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- The remoteness of the island allows visitors to experience the solitude of the early monastic community.

#### Associated Properties

Skellig Michael (well-preserved examples of similar beehive cells); **Oronsay Priory** (Eileach-an-Naoimh was a possession of the Augustinian Priory until the Reformation); **Iona Abbey** (the early Christian monastery was probably similar to that on Iona); Clonfert Monastery (traditionally founded by St Brendan); **Eilean Mòr** (an early Christian island monastery/hermitage, and evidence of post-medieval occupation).

Keywords St Brendan, Eithne's Cross, early Christian, beehive cell, monastery, anchorite, eremitic, chapel, church, burial-ground, human remains, corn-drying kiln, byre, cultivation remains, rig