

EXCAVATION OF A CHAPEL AT ST. NINIAN'S POINT, ISLE OF BUTE

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INTRODUCTORY

The Chapel described in the following report stands on a low rocky promontory, known as St. Ninian's Point, that forms the western shore of St. Ninian's Bay, on the west coast of the Island of Bute.⁽¹⁾ The ruins of two other ancient Chapels are situated in the vicinity — one less than a mile to the north below the farm of Ardroscaidale, and the second a little over a mile to the south-east at Little Kilmory — while south-westwards on the nearby island of Inchmarnock there is the site of a third Chapel, dedicated to St. Marnock, which has produced a fragment of a Norse cross-head in slate bearing a runic inscription. ⁽²⁾

The promontory is linked to the mainland by nothing more than a narrow strip of beach, and at times of storm and very high tides it is turned into an island. It measures approximately 650 yds. in length from north to south by 140 yds. in greatest breadth, and the Chapel has been erected on the highest point, near the centre of the promontory and some 25 ft. above the high watermark. There are two dwelling-houses a short distance to the north-east of the site, and a derelict cottage immediately to the south-east, while three sources of water — two wells (one of which is still in use) and a spring — lie close at hand.

Nothing was known about the history of the Chapel prior to excavation, although a fairly detailed

description and rough plan of the remains was published by Hewison in 1893.⁽³⁾ In the ensuing half-century, the site had, however, become largely overgrown, with the result that many of the features recorded by Hewison, and particularly the circular enclosure wall which he observed surrounding the Chapel, were no longer visible.

THE EXCAVATIONS

Under the auspices of the Bute Natural History Society, excavation of the site was undertaken by the author assisted by Senior Students of Rothesay Academy;⁽⁴⁾ the work occupied a period of approximately five weeks in 1952 and a further two weeks in 1954.

THE CHAPEL

This proved to be an oblong building lying with its major axis east and west and measuring over the walls from 28 ft. 6 in. to 29 ft. 10 in. in length by 20 ft. 8 in. in width. Although Hewison suspected the existence

- (1) O.S. 6 in. map Buteshire Sheet CCIII SE; National Grid Reference NS (26) /035612.
- (2) Romilly Allen, "The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland," 412-3.
- (3) J. K. Hewison, "The Isle of Bute in the Olden Time," Vol. I, 95-7.
- (4) 1952. Peter Barlow, Nicol Currie, Alistair Duthie, Forrester Glen, Harvey Mason, Murdo McLean, Bruce Niven, Dick Ryan, Alastair Scott, John Wilson.

1954. Edward McGuinness, Bruce Niven, Forrest Niven. of a dividing wall, separating the nave and chancel,⁽¹⁾ no trace of such a partition was in fact found, the interior forming a single cell 21 ft. in length by 13 ft. in width. The walls, 4 ft. thick at the gables and from

(1) Hewison, Vol. I. 96.

3 ft. 6 in. to 3 ft. 8 in. thick at the sides, were laid directly on the rock and were standing to a maximum height of 3 ft. 10 in.; they were composed throughout of unworked stones taken from the beach and set in clay, while clay was also used to plaster the inner faces (Photo No. 1). The doorway, situated in the south wall, was not furnished with stone jambs, nor are wooden jambs likely to have been employed in view of the fact that the opening was only 2 ft. 6 in. wide. A single large threshold stone, resting on three smaller stones bound with clay, extended across the full width of the doorway, forming a step 8 in. deep, down to the floor of the Chapel (Photo No. 2). The floor itself was largely composed of beaten clay laid in some places directly on the rock, and in others on a preliminary levelling of coralline seaweed or marl, but patches of bare rock obtruded through the clay at several points. Immediately to the west of the doorway there was a single paving stone bonded into the wall, while more extensive paving occurred on either side of a small stone structure, built against the centre of the east wall, which Mr Cruden identified as an early type of altar (Photo No. 3).

The altar measured 4 ft. 8 in. long by 3 ft. broad and stood to a maximum height of 2 ft. 3 in. The east side abutted the wall of the Chapel, while the west side had been boxed in by two large slabs of slate, each 2 in. thick and laid on edge, which had, however, been broken at some time in the past. The ends of the altar were not boxed in in similar fashion, the north end, together with the core of the altar for a distance of 30 in. from that end, being constructed of roughly coursed stones set in clay, whereas the south end had only two courses of large masonry, the lower of which projected to form a step or kneeling-stone (Photo No. 4), while the upper one supported a stone shelf built against the east wall of the Chapel. In front of this shelf there was a space measuring 26 in. by 10 in. and the fair faces on the north and east sides of the cavity

lying immediately behind the slab forming the front of the altar at this point suggest that this cavity was intentional, and not the result of later destruction. There was no sign of a table-stone, and although many large flat stones were encountered both inside and outside the Chapel in the course of excavation, none was of a suitable size or type to have served this purpose.

In front of the altar, a skeleton (Fig. I A-A) was found lying east and west in a natural hollow only 4 in. below the floor level. It was not enclosed in a cist, nor had it any stone covering it. The skull had been crushed and some of the leg bones were missing; the hands were folded across the body, and the feet were touching a large stone which supported the two slabs forming the front of the altar at their junction. With the burial was found a small undecorated strip of bronze which appeared to have been used as a band round some thin, flat object, such as a strap, but this is unfortunately quite undateable. The skeletal remains were carefully covered up pending further examination. Before this could be done they were disturbed by unauthorised persons, but such bones as were recovered have been identified by Dr. Wells as those of a young woman of approximately 27 years of age, of slender build and 5 ft. 3 in. in height. Mr Radford points out (Appendix C) that the burial is not without significance for the date of the Chapel.

The only finds of interest amongst the debris and rubbish that had accumulated within the Chapel were a number of crude slates of irregular shape and showing little sign of trimming: they ranged from 6 in. to 22 in. in length by from 6 in. to 8 in. in breadth, and were all pierced with from one to three peg-holes. Since these slates occurred at various levels in the in-filling it is not, however, certain whether they represent the original roofing-material of the Chapel, or the replacement of an original thatched roof in slate at some later period, or indeed whether they have not simply been dumped on the site at some comparatively

recent date. That dumping continued into fairly recent times is amply attested by the rest of the contents of the in-filling, which contained fragments of late 16th- and early 17th-century pottery, and a glass bottle and a brooch, both of 18th century date.

THE ENCLOSURE WALL AND GRAVEYARD.

Two trenches dug respectively from the north and east walls of the Chapel located the enclosure wall noted by Hewison, and the course of this wall was traced at intervals on all sides except the north-east, where it had been completely rooted out by stone-robbers. On the south-east (Photo No. 5), where it was best preserved, the wall was 3 ft. in thickness and 3 ft. in height, the top being just below the modern ground surface, and was built of undressed stones in dry-wall technique. In some places the foundations were laid on a levelling of coralline seaweed, and in others directly on the rock; on the south side crude external buttresses had been provided in two places by jamming large stones vertically into clefts in the rock. Assuming that the missing sector on the north-east was built on the same radius as the rest, the wall will have been circular on plan with an internal diameter of 72 ft. The position of the entrance is uncertain, but it is worth noting that it cannot have been sited directly in line with the entrance to the Chapel. At one point, on the east-south-east, the enclosure wall incorporated a fragment of an older wall running at right-angles to it, but there was no evidence to identify the type of structure represented by this primary walling. Two kitchen middens containing large quantities of oyster- and cockle-shells, and animal bones, were piled against the outer face of the enclosure wall in the same area, and a similar midden occupied the site of the wall on the south-west arc. None of these middens, however, yielded any dateable material.

Trial-trenching of the area within the enclosure wall to east and north of the chapel revealed no structural remains apart from a row of four paving-stones, in line with the south wall of the Chapel, beneath which were a few finger bones, and a lower mandible, from a disturbed burial. On the other hand, no less than nine burials were encountered in this area (Fig. Ib - J) while another (K) was found immediately outside the entrance to the Chapel, and yet another (L) outside the enclosure wall on the east. Details of the skeletons are given in Appendix A. In all cases the bodies had been laid in shallow graves which had no stone lining, though in two instances (J and K) the heads of the corpses had been supported by small stones. Some of the burials (e.g. D, E, F, G, H, and J) were evidently Christian, since the bodies were oriented east and west and were unaccompanied by grave-goods, but burials C (lying north-east and south-west), and I and L (both lying north and south) must be regarded as pagan. Burial I in fact was found at a lower level than the rest, and was overlaid by the presumably Christian burial II, while a fragment of jet armlet was found beside the bones in burial L. This armlet is not, however, precisely dateable: it could be of almost any period up to about the 9th century A.D.

C=Certain.
P=Probable.
It is noteworthy in relation to the history of the site, that all the human remains so far identified are adult. Moreover, out of at least nine individuals identified, only two are certainly male and one probably, whereas four are certainly females, two others probably female, one of the certain females having been buried in front of the altar.

Descriptive Letter (Fig. 1.)	Sex	Age	Height	Observations
A.	Female	C 27	5' 3"	Slender build (In front of Altar).
B.	Female	C Adult	—	Nil.
C.	Female	C Adult	5' 1"	Robust, longer bones in right forearm than A.
D.	No data			
E.	do.			
F.	do.			
G.	Female	C Adult	—	Robust, probably taller than A. or C.
H.	Female	C Adult	5' 5"	Moderate muscular development. Both bones of right forearm had been broken and healed with deformity.
I.	Male	C Adult	—	Poor muscular development.
J.	Male	P Adult	—	Strong muscular development.
K.	Male	C 35+	tall	Robust. (Lying outside Chapel Wall).
L.	Female	P Adult	—	

HUMAN REMAINS

APPENDIX A

Report of Dr. Laurence Wells, Edinburgh, on skeletons (Fig. 1.).

APPENDIX A. — Continued

Report on teeth by Henry W. Noble, Glasgow.

Descriptive Letter	(Fig. 1.)	Sex	Age	Observations
J.	P	Male	25-35	Fairly severe attrition. Tips of coronal denture exposed in all cases.
K.	C	Male	35+	Most severe attrition. In the case of three teeth attrition has proceeded as far as the roots. In all teeth attrition has proceeded as far as the pulp chambers.
G.	C	Female	25-35	Severe attrition.

Lower mandible from beneath four slabs in Enclosure Area.
Sex — Male, age 18. Teeth in good condition.

Report on skull by Henry W. Noble.

Descriptive Letter (Fig. 1.)	Sex	Type	Cranial Index	Cranial Height Index
K.	Male	Dolichocephalic	74	72

The upper part of the face was relatively long with a Superior Facial Index of 58.

APPENDIX B

REPORTS ON THE FINDS

REPORT ON SLATES by W. G. E. Caldwell, B.Sc., Dept. of Geology, Glasgow University.

1. THE SLATES — by W. G. E. Caldwell, B.Sc., Dept. of Geology, Glasgow University. Type of rock — "Low grade metamorphosed phyllite, probably of local origin, such rocks being common in Cowal and in North Bute, north of the Highland Boundary Fault.

2. THE BROOCH AND THE PIECE OF BRONZE — by R. B. K. Stevenson, Keeper, National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland. The brooch is made of brass gilded with "pinchbeck," giving a probable 18th Century date (dia. 22 m.m.) (Photograph No. 10). On a raised rim 5 m.m. wide there is an interlacing cable design.

The piece of bronze is old (found associated with skeleton A. in front of the altar). It measures 35 m.m. in length and 6 m.m. at the widest part and has one end pointed, the other end broken off. It is impossible to date it accurately and its function is obscure (Photograph No. 10).

3. THE POTTERY. Among the pieces of pottery submitted to Mr Stewart Cruden, H.M. Inspector of Ancient Monuments for Scotland, was a fragment of crude pottery found (unstratified) in the eastern area of the enclosure. He notes that it has been subjected to intense heat and that the material is fused. He indicates that it might be part of a crucible.

4. THE JET. The fragment of jet armlet is roughly circular, with an internal diameter of 2". In section it is oval .3" x .2" with the outer face smoothed and the inner composed of three flattened planes with traces of tool marks. It would seem to be comparable with other examples of jet armlets found in Arran. The history of the latter is as yet obscure.

5. THE KITCHEN MIDDENS. These contained oyster shells, cockle shells and bone fragments, including teeth of animals. The latter were submitted to Mr Henry W. Noble and his report indicated that remains of ox, sheep, pig and carnivore were present, an interesting point being that the examination of the

left ascending ramus of a fully developed bull or cow showed it to be 25% smaller in all respects than that of a present day animal of the same age. Steensberg in an article in the *Archaeological News Letter*, Volume 5, No. 9, February, 1955, refers to "the skeleton of a medieval cow which reveals a degenerate breed; whose full grown members stood little more than a yard high."

APPENDIX C

DATING AND PARALLELS

The dating and development of the early buildings of the Celtic Church present problems of some difficulty in view of the scarcity of examples that can be identified in the historical records. The excavation of the Chapel on St. Ninian's Point, Bute, has provided data for a tentative reconstruction of the history of the site, while the form of the altar has thrown valuable light on the contemporary cult of relics.

The Chapel was built of undressed rubble set in clay and originally plastered with clay on the inner face. The latest survey of Irish churches suggests that the use of mortared masonry penetrated to Ireland in the 7th or 8th century.¹ This does not necessarily imply that the older practice of unmortared masonry set in clay was at once discontinued, though it is likely to have become obsolete in the course of the next century or so. In my view it would be unwise to attribute a building with the masonry set in clay, instead of using lime mortar, to a period later than the Viking raids of the 9th and 10th centuries. The evidence from Galloway bears this out. The oldest church at Whithorn, identified as the original Candida Casa of the 5th century, had the stones set in clay with the face plastered.² Chapel Finnian at Mochrum, attributed to the 10th or 11th century, was built with lime mortar, which was also used to plaster the inner face of the walls and to surface the floor.³ Nothing in fact disclosed by the

excavations on St. Ninian's Point, Bute, precludes an ascription of the Chapel to the period before the beginning of the Viking raids and probably to a date not later than the 8th century.

The Chapel is not the oldest feature in the Christian use of the site. The grave in front of the altar lay only 4 ins. under the floor. The body must have perished and the hollow of the grave fallen in, before the floor was laid. The grave in front of the south door must also have been old and forgotten by the time that the chapel was built. Chapel Finnian at Mochrum was not, apparently, a graveyard, but there again the priority of the enclosure over the chapel seems likely.⁴ The position of the burials indicates a similar sequence in some of the keills of the Isle of Man, of which Keill Pherrick, at Droma, may serve as an example.⁵ The Welsh word *llan* points to the same development; the primary meaning was an enclosure, the idea of a built church being a secondary connotation.⁶ Finally we may point to an example nearer Bute: the "cemetery which had been previously consecrated by St. Ninian" was chosen for his church at Glasgow by St. Kentigern.⁷

The pre-Viking dating of the chapel carries the origin of the enclosure and cemetery on St. Ninian's Point back to the period of the conversion, probably in the 6th or early 7th century. This early dating is borne out by the graveyard itself. In addition to the oriented burials within the enclosure, there are one lying north and south, another lying northeast and southwest, both within the enclosure, and a third lying north and south outside. The first is among the earliest burials, being overlaid by a normal oriented grave. The third yielded a fragment of a shale armlet (fig.). These three burials can hardly be Christian, yet there is nothing to suggest that they are separated by any long interval from the other graves. These facts can best be explained by assuming that the Christian community continued to use the old pagan

burial ground and that the history of the site was continuous during the period of the conversion.⁸

To the archaeological evidence may be added that afforded by the name. Though the Chapel is not noted in the original Statistical Account, the mention in that source of St. Ninian's Bay as a safe harbour and anchorage carries the record back to 1791, a date which precludes a modern introduction. The name Ninian implies a connection with Whithorn, not necessarily with the saint himself, but with the community of which he was the founder. Whithorn was a famous school in the 5th and 6th centuries, but during the following 100 years the site and the monastery came into the hands of the Angles of Northumbria.⁹ Bute was not conquered by the Anglian kingdom and Christian penetration from Galloway into the island is unlikely to have taken place after the middle of the 7th century. The name therefore suggests an earlier origin and again brings us back to the period of the conversion.

The empty space on the south side of the altar has a carefully finished back, side and base. Its front was formed by the slab forming the top of the altar. This was found, but that proves nothing, as such a slab would have readily fallen a victim to stone robbers concerned with the erection of the modern cottages in the vicinity. The resulting space measures 26 ins. by 10 ins.; it must have been some 18 ins. high, allowing a total height of some 3 ft. for the altar, including a mensa, about 4 ins. thick.

Such a cavity in the body of the altar can only have been a relic holder. The space is too small to take a complete body, though it might have served for the dismembered bones of a body translated from elsewhere.¹⁰ More probably it was intended for representative relics — the strips of silk cut from the cloth in which the body of a saint was wrapped.¹¹ Normally these relics were enclosed in a small casket or pyx,

which in turn was set in a stone box placed immediately under the mensa; such boxes have been found with a hollow about 6 ins. across. The method at St. Ninian's Chapel was different; it can best be explained by the earlier and more elaborate example in the church of Manastirine outside Salona in Dalmatia. When the earlier cemetery chapels were combined to form a large basilica at the beginning of the 5th century, provision was made, not only for the corporeal relics of the local martyrs, but for representative relics of St. Peter, which had been obtained from Rome. These were cased in a lead casket measuring 10 by 5 ins. and 3 ins. high; this was set in a chamber measuring 45 by 33 ins., which formed part of an annexe beside the main altar. The chamber was provided with a small window opening inwards.¹² The window was intended to provide restricted access to the relic holder for the purpose of hallowing other relics. That such access was still permitted in Saxon times is proved by the record of shrines of the 8th century noted in the History of Bede.¹³ These parallels suggest that the cavity in the altar at St. Ninian's Chapel also contained relics and that restricted access was provided for, probably by means of a stone slab with an aperture forming the south side above the "kneeling-stone." The relics were probably brought from Whithorn to commemorate the eponymous saint.

The position of the chapel and enclosure on St. Ninian's Point does not suggest a monastery, which is likely to have lain in a more central position near the main contemporary settlement. The isolation of the site points rather to a retreat, perhaps a retreat which stood to the main monastery in the same relation as St. Ninian's Cave at Physgill did to Whithorn.¹⁴

In conclusion, the history of the site may be summarised as follows. The enclosure on St. Ninian's Point was built as a Christian place of worship and burial ground in the 6th or early 7th century on the site of an earlier pagan cemetery. It was founded

from Whithorn, probably as a dependency of a larger missionary community. The site was apparently disused after the disturbances occasioned by the Viking raids and in this connection Mr R. B. K. Stevenson has drawn my attention to the absence of sculptured stones, in marked contrast to St. Blane's Church in the south of the island, where there are a number of crosses dating from the 10th or 11th century.¹⁵ The chapel must have continued to be a cult centre throughout the Middle Ages, as only this would account for the survival of the name.

C. A. Raleigh Radford, M.A., V.P.S.A.

NOTES

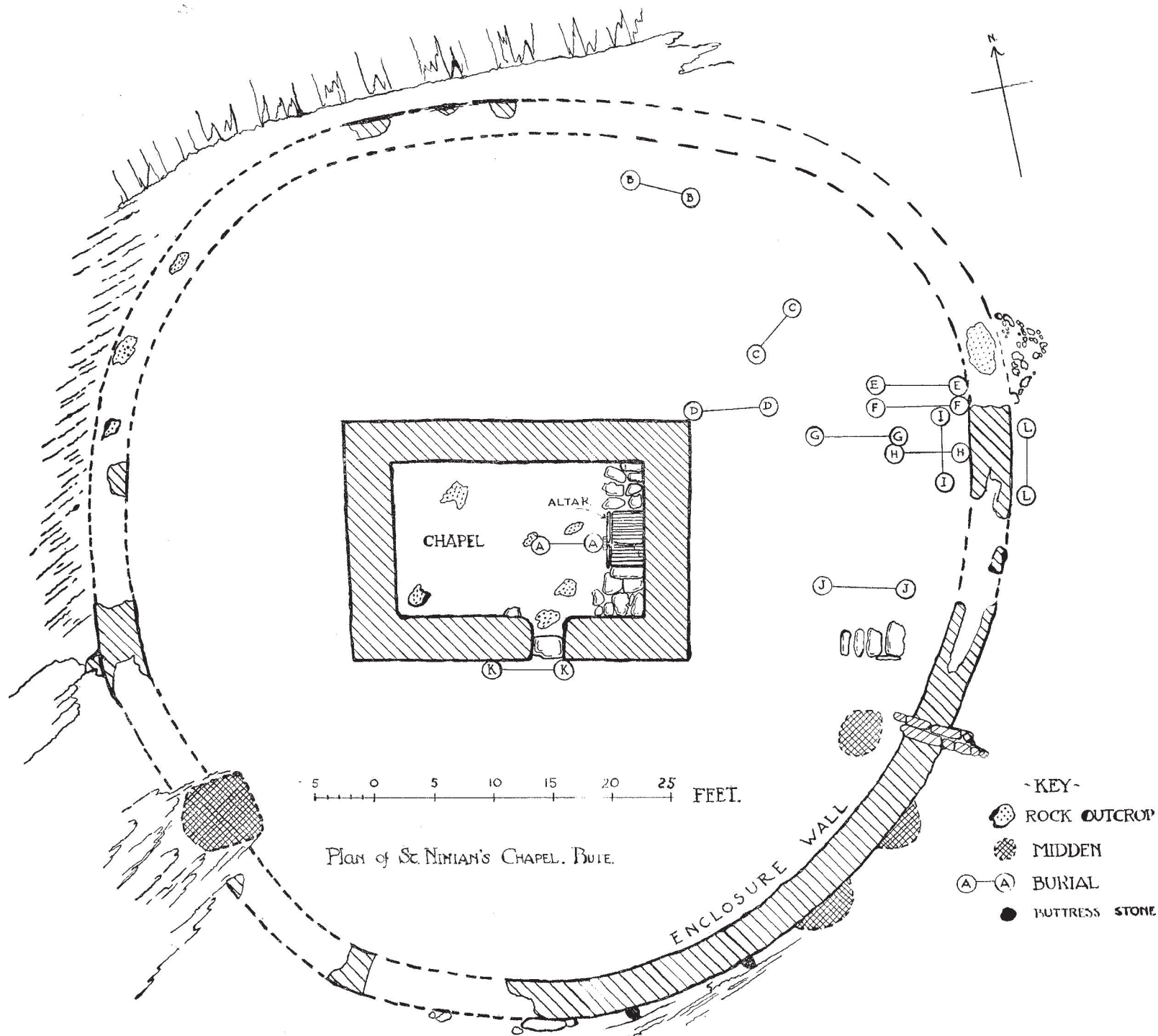
1. Leask, H.G., *Irish Church and Monastic Buildings*, i, 2.
2. *Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Archaeological Transactions*, III, xxvii, 113-9.
3. *Ibid.*, xxviii, 34-40; the remains of the plaster floor have been found during the recent clearance by the Ministry of Works.
4. *Ibid.*, xxviii, 40.
5. Manx Archaeological Survey Committee, ii, 8.
6. Lloyd, J.E., *History of Wales*, 149, n. 122.
7. *Vita Kentigerni* cap. ix in *Historians of Scotland*, vol. V; cf. *Dumfriesshire and Galloway Transactions*, III, xxxi, 176.
8. The juxtaposition of pagan and Christian burials in the earliest period is well illustrated by an Irish episode in the life of St. Patrick. The saint, according to Tirechan, transferred the cross which had wrongly been set above the grave of a pagan in Campus Albus so that it might stand above the adjacent burial of the Christian (*Tripartite Life of St. Patrick in Rolls Series*, lxxxix, ii, 325).
9. Cf. *Dumfriesshire and Galloway Transactions*, III, xxvii, 95.
10. Cf. the small linen bag, which contained the bones of the Venerable Bede and was found resting in the coffin of St. Cuthbert, when this was opened in 1104: *Capitula de miraculis* . . . vii, 5 in *Symeon of Durham (Rolls Series, lxxv, i, 252)*.
11. S. Gregorii Magni, *Epistol* iv, 29 in *Monumenta Germaniae historica Epistolarium*, i, 264-5.
12. *Forschungen in Salona*, ii, 21-2 and 45.
13. E.g. *Bedae Historia ecclesiastica*, iv, 3 (Edit. Plummer, i, 212).
14. *Dumfriesshire and Galloway Transactions*, III, xxviii, 96-8.
15. Anderson, J., *Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, 407.

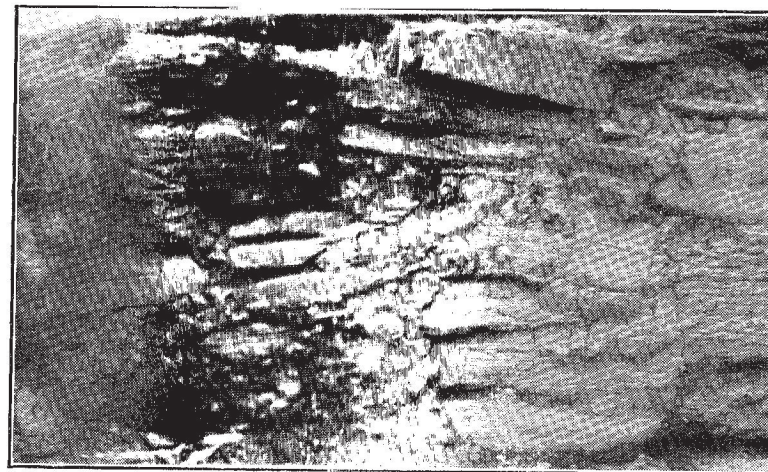
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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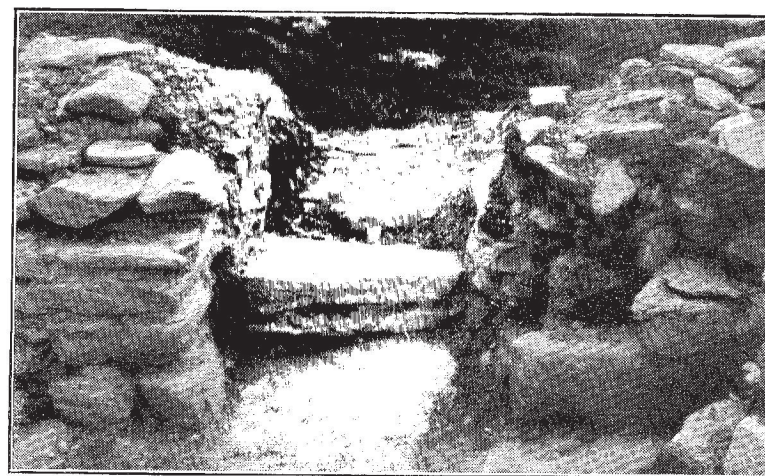
For specialist and technical help I acknowledge gratefully the help of Dr. Kenneth Steer, Chief Investigator to the Commission on Ancient Monuments and especially to C. A. Raleigh Radford, M.A., V.P.S.A., the acknowledged authority on St. Ninian, for his criticisms and interpretation of the site. To Mr Stewart A. Cruden, H.M.I. of Ancient Monuments; Henry W. Noble, Lecturer on Dental Anatomy, Glasgow University; Dr. Martin Jope, Queen's University, Belfast; Dr. D. B. Harden, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; R. B. K. Stevenson, National Museum of Antiquities, Edinburgh; Mr M. Apted, Ministry of Works; W. G. E. Caldwell, Dept. of Geology, Glasgow University.

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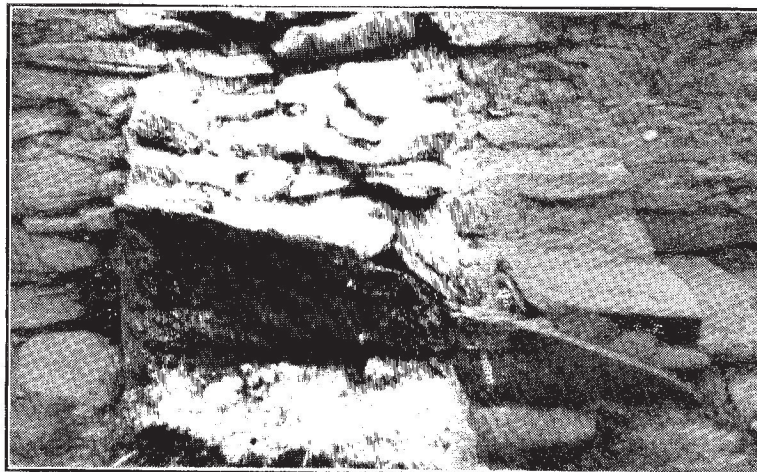




Inner face of North Wall, showing clay facing



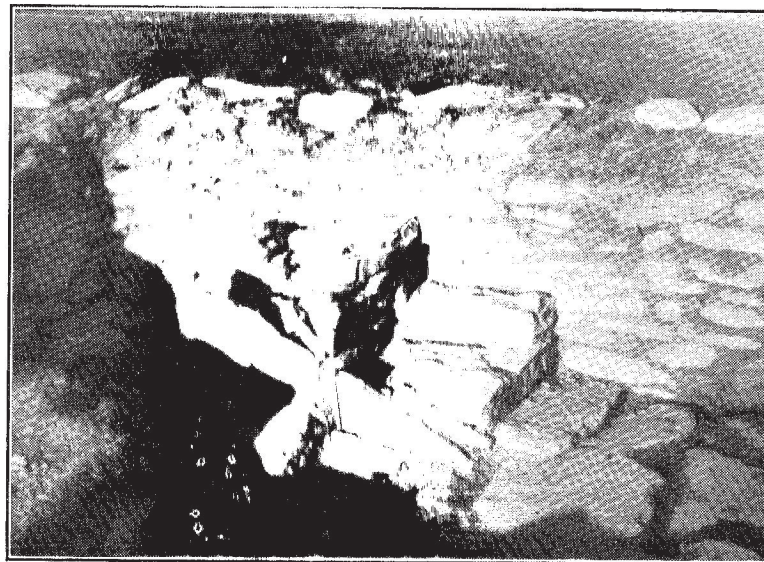
Chapel Doorway, showing step



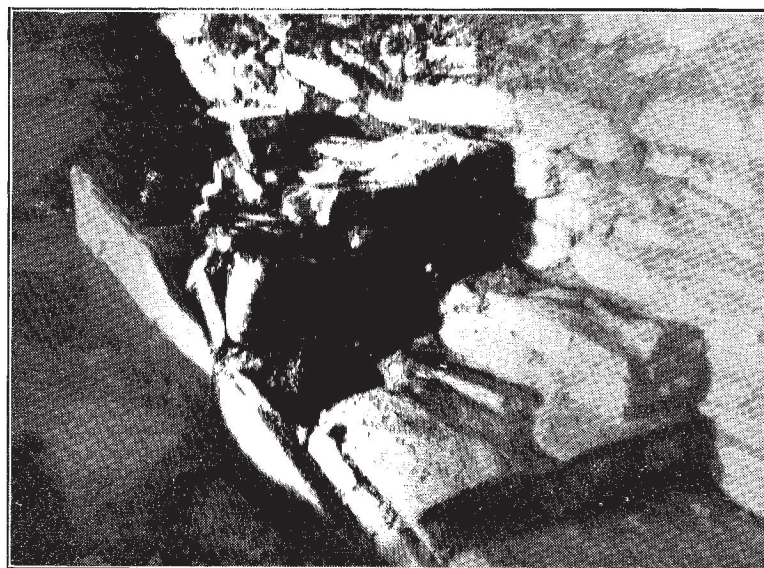
Front of Altar



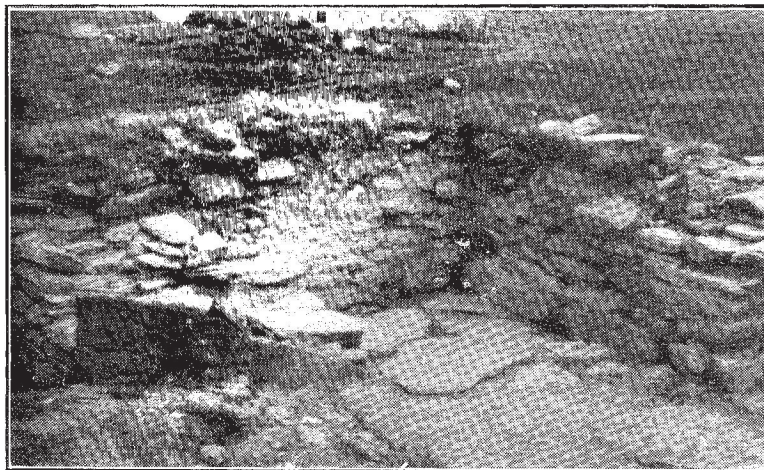
Kneeling Stone and Shelf, South side of Altar



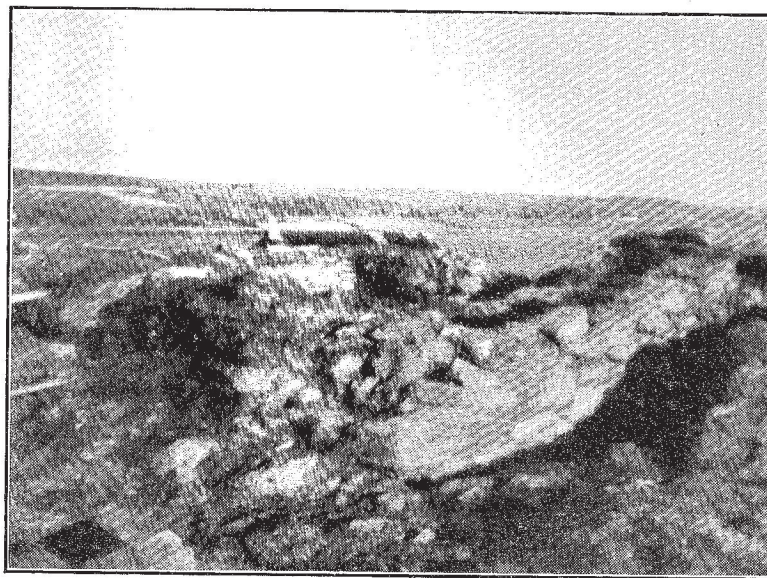
Altar and inner face of East Wall, showing Flagstones
on either side and position of burial in front of Altar



Altar from Doorway in South Wall



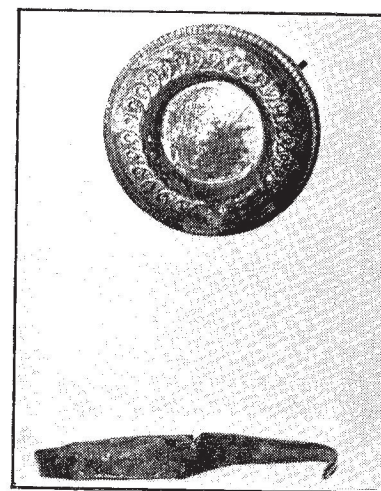
Interior, South East, showing Flagstones



Exterior, Western Gable



Part of Enc'osure Wall, South East



Brooch, and Bronze Object