Portmahomack on Tarbat Ness: Changing Ideologies in North-East Scotland, Sixth to Sixteenth Century AD

by Martin Carver, Justin Garner-Lahire and Cecily Spall


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**Legend**

% possible Pictish, pre-nineteenth-century existence [6]
+ Norse, ninth–eleventh century [6]
* Gaelic, probably medieval, eleventh–sixteenth century [56]

The site nos are from RCAHMS 1979.

**Placenames**

% * Allan: medieval name cited 1479. Watson (1904: 275) sees Allan as Pictish, meaning a swampy place.

% Annat: see Castlecraig.

+ Arboll: Norse *ork-bol*; ‘farm of the ark?’ Nearby is *Lôn tigh nan cat* ‘Cats’ house meadow’.

* Balachladich: ‘village on the shore’.

* Baladie: ‘village of the stream’.

* Balintore: was G. *Bail’ an todhair* [‘village of the mark’]. It was also Abbot’s Port, Abbot’s haven.


Balone Mill: Stone and brick-built mill and mill pond visible in 1977 (RCAHMS no 332; NH 930 890).

* Balnabruach: ‘Town on the banks’. Site of a cemetery of the early Bronze Age (see cemeteries).

Balnapaling: Shell middens exposed west of Dunskeath Castle (RCAHMS no 337, 338; NH C 801 692, 804 689).

* Balnui: G. *bail’ an aog* ‘village of death’.

* Bayfield, Ankerville: names changed in the eighteenth century for what was formerly Kindeace, G. *Cinn-déis*.

+ Bindal: Norse *bind-dalr* ‘sheaf dale’. Traditional site of a hermitage (see chapels).

* Binn Nigg: hill of Nigg.

* Broomtown G. *bail’ a’ bhealaide* [not glossed]. Between this and Balintore was the ‘pass of the cattle’.

% * Cadboll (Cathabal 1529): Norse *kattar-ból*, ‘cat-stead’. (From ‘cat’ rather than battle. There was a sixteenth-century castle (RCAHMS no 252, NH 878 776) and two chapels of St Mary, one north near Cadboll Mount and one south on the sea shore (see Chapels). Enclosures have been recorded inland from the castle (RCAHMS no 194, NH 871 778) and on the coast (RCAHMS no 284, NH 889 782).

Cadboll Mount: A pyramid with a base 29m square and 6m high, built before 1760 by a Laird of Cadboll to look down on his lands (RCAHMS no 339, NH 889 790).

* Castle Corbet: G. *an Caistéal dearg*, Red Castle. Site of cist burial found in 1845 (RCAHMS no 94, NH 900 832). Shell middens exposed in 1977 (RCAHMS no 341, NH 902 833). Possible site of a broch, see Cnoc Tigh.

* Castlecraig: now the name of a farm on which may yet be traced the lines of the castle built by William the Lion in 1179. Was Dùn Sgáth fort of dread (Eng. Dunskaithe). Also contained %Annat (a church that contains the relics of the founder; Rhidorach, dark slope; Culbinn (back of the hill). (RCAHMS no 247, NH 807 689).

Castlehaven (Port a’ Chasteil): A river accessible to a boat at high water at the northernmost point of Tarbat with a tradition accessible to a boat at high water at the northernmost point of Tarbat with a tradition of a rectilinear enclosure measuring about 40m north–south by at least 45m within a ditch about 3m wide (RCAHMS no 197, NH 742 735).

* Morangie: G. *Mòr(ais)tidh* ‘big haugh’ (meadow). Site of a dun measuring c 13m in diameter (RCAHMS no 188; NH 761 839).

* Nig 1227: G. ‘n eig at the notch. Probably the V-shaped gulley on which the church stands, ‘on the analogy of other parish names it is perhaps safer to regard this gulley as the notch which gave its name first to the church and then to the parish’ (Watson 1904, 50).

* Pitcalnie: G. *Baile-chainidh*, perhaps from Gaulish root (Watson 1904, 276).

* Pitcalzean: G. *Baill’ a choilean*, ‘village of the little wood’. A circular enclosure c 16m in diameter was noted 1.4m east of Pitcalzean House (south of Nigg) in 1977 (RCAHMS no 196, NH 816 703).

* Pitkerrie: G. *Baile-chéiridh*, ‘Dark place’.

* Pouflock: G. *poll a’ phoca*, ‘pool of the bag’.

* Rarichie: G. *Rath-riachaidh shios agus R shuas*, Fort of the scratches [as of brambles]; but the local derivation is ‘The Picts lived at Cadha ’n ruigh and in springtime they

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**Digest 8 MONUMENTS AND PLACENAMES ON THE TARBAT PENINSULA**

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D151
would say: 'tiugamaid 'bhàn 'dheanamh rotha rìachgain' 'let us go down to make rows of scratches' (to sow seed in') (Watson 1904, 51). This implies an association between the duns and ard cultivation. Rarichie was a seat of the Ross family (see Chapter 7, p 288).

Easter Rarichie is a complex multiperiod fort on a prominent knoll on the lower slopes of the Hill of Nigg. The defences comprise three ramparts, two walls and an inner enclosure which may be a dun' (RCAHMS no 264, NH 843 736). Wester Rarichie is a dun 10.5m across on a prominent knoll 250m west of Easter Rarichie (RCAHMS no 190; NH 840 736).

Red Castle: A castle, ruinous and removed before 1872 (RCAHMS no 182; NH 840 736).

Rockfield: was G * ràthan. 'Little fort'.

Lochslin: G. from loch, a lake. 'Lochslin, as a loch, has disappeared, and survives only in the names Lochslin Farm and the ancient ruin of Lochslin Castle' (Watson 1904, 42). 'The lower courses of the north-east corner of this tower-house are visible in a clearance heap' (RCAHMS no 260, NH 849 806, seen 1977.)

Shell middens exposed in 1977 (RCAHMS no 348, NH 904 803).

Men's meeting place.

Nectans' path'. Portage, also isthmus (Watson 1904, 42). 'The lower courses of the north-east corner of this tower-house are visible in a clearance heap' (RCAHMS no 260, NH 849 806, seen 1977.)

Shell middens exposed in 1977 (RCAHMS no 348, NH 904 803).

Men's meeting place.

Nectans' path'. Portage, also isthmus (Watson 1904, 42). 'The lower courses of the north-east corner of this tower-house are visible in a clearance heap' (RCAHMS no 260, NH 849 806, seen 1977.)

Shell middens exposed in 1977 (RCAHMS no 348, NH 904 803).
an entrance gap c 2.0m wide towards
the south end of the east wall (visited 14 September 1972). Appears to have been
an early rectangular building, with an
enclosure and clearance heaps (heaps of
stones removed from the surface before
the land was ploughed for the first time)
(RCAHMS, Site 280; NH 9387 8502). Bindal is Norse meaning 'sheaf-steadying'.
Nearby is Stiana Bleadar (Norse = Stone
spot).

8. Balnabruach: a chapel recorded by
Davidson (1946, 27; RCAHMS no 206,
NH C 908 840).

Chappel" (Macfarlane 1906–8, 1, 215).

10. Cadboll Mount: A chapel of St Mary (1)
was recorded west of Geanies in 1529
and still visible in 1855, but occupied by
a rubbish dump by 1977 (RCAHMS no 210,
NH 883 791; OPS II, 2, 434).

11. Cadboll, Hilton of: a chapel of St Mary
(2) on the sea shore (RCAHMS no 224,
NH 873 768). The foundations are still
visible. The large and small parts of
the Hilton of Cadboll cross-slab were found
at the west end of the chapel. The chapel
appears to have served the medieval
village of Cadboll Fisher. See Chapter
5:10, p 252.

12. Old Shandwick chapel (fifteenth century).
Exposed at the edge of a quarry. The
chapel stood in a burial ground until the
end of the eighteenth century (FSA, 592).
By 1977 only two dressed stones and a
length of walling survived (RCAHMS no
233, NH 8582 7453).

13. Castlecraig in Nigg parish: formerly
contained an Anamid 'The Annat', which
refers to a chapel with relics of the
founder (Watson 1904, 52–3). Castle built
by William the Lion at Dunsketh in 1179
(at Castlecraig) (NSA, 25) (RCAHMS no
211, NH C 822 707).

14. Nigg: parish church dedicated to St Fiacre
dating from 1626. Earliest reference to
a church is 1255–6 (cf Portmahomack).
Site of the Nigg Pictish cross slab
(RCAHMS no 231, NH 804 717). 'A rude
dressed stone' is said to have stood
in the churchyard in 1835 (RCAHMS
no 120, NH 804 717). A cropmark of a
large house visible on an air photograph
was associated with the Bishop of Ross
(RCAHMS no 268, NH 804 717).

15. Midd Genie. Traditional site of a Chapel
dedicated to St Barr, on the coast at
Geanies (RCAHMS, no 227, NH 897 792;

16. Culiss (Nigg): where there is small
enclosure that goes by the name of Chapel
Park. 'Scarce a vestige of the building
remains' (FSA, 592; RCAHMS no 216,
NH C 828 752).

17. Newton. Chapel said to date from
sixteenth century. Used as a burial
ground until 1832, lower walls remained
in 1978 (RCAHMS no 230, NH 845 814).

18. Fearn Abbey. Founded at New Fearn in
c 1238. Still in use as a parish church in
1769 (RCAHMS no 237, NH 833 777).

19. Delny. Former existence of a chapel
dedicated to St Mary (RCAHMS no 217,
NH C 734 723).

20. Wilkhaven [Port nam faochag ?whelk]
had a chapel dedicated to St Bride.

Early cemeteries
Balintore. Many sightings of cist burials in
nineteenth and twentieth centuries (RCAHMS
nos 88–92).

Balnabruach (NH 908 840). Site of a cemetery
of the early Bronze Age and later. In the 1992
watching brief on the course of a pipeline,
GUARD found a shell midden, a Bronze Age
short stone cist. Body probably male 17–25;
a long cist with an extended skeleton north–
south; another east–west above it (Report by
D Low, Highland Council).

Balnabruach. A cist found in 1922 and two
'vases' in 1945 (RCAHMS no 93, NH 794 698).

Castle Corbet. Site of a cist burial found in
1885, about 160m west of Castle Corbet.
It contained a cremation and a small urn
(RCAHMS no 94, NH 900 832).

Cnoc Dubh, near Ballone Castle. Stone coffin
recorded here in 1904 (Watson 1904, 48).

Nigg: 'At Nigg Rocks, below Cadgha
Neachdain, there is a graveyard, now covered
in shingle. Here the Danish princes were
buried. Their gravestones came from Denmark
and had iron rings in them to facilitate their
landing. So local tradition. This most unlikely
spot for a graveyard was not selected without
some good reason, the most probable being
that hermits once lived in the coves, whence
the place was reckoned holy ground' (Watson
1904, 56).

North Sutor. Two urns found close to North
Sutor in 1820–3. One contained what
probably a cremation, the other what appears
to have been a jet necklace (RCAHMS no 109,
NH C 800 691). Many animal bones were
found in associated layers (ibid 57).

Portmahomack (see Chapter 4, p 77).

Shandwick burial ground and cross slab
(Clach' Charaidh). 'At [the Shandwick stone]
all unbaptized infants of the parish were
buried up till fairly recent times. It is now
cultivated' (Watson in 1904: 56). 'Near
Shandwick Farm-house, to the south-west,
between the sea and the rock was a graveyard
… some of the stones are still visible' (ibid 57).

[At Easter Rarichie] 'the curate of Nigg lived
and the field behind his house is called "raon a
chlaith" the graveyard field. The plough goes
over it now and formerly used to strike the
gravestones, but these are now removed (ibid
57). The burial ground is reported to have
been levelled in about 1885 (RCAHMS no 236,
NH 855 747). A cist containing a crouched
inhumation was found and left in situ in about
1954 (RCHAMS no 111, NH 855 746). There
was a chapel in the vicinity (see chapels) and
a castle built in 1460 was ruined by 1780 and
removed in 1942 (RCAHMS no 263, NH 858
745).

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References to RCAHMS are to their archaeo-
logical field survey of Easter Ross, Ross and
Cromarty District, Highland Region, issued
in February 1979.

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