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by Martin Carver, Justin Garner-Lahire and Cecily Spall

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Chapter 1

The Late Iron Age, Pictish, Medieval and Later Settlement at Portmahomack

Introduction

The purpose of this volume is to present the recent archaeological discoveries made at and around Portmahomack on the Tarbat peninsula in north-east Scotland, and to consider their significance. Tarbat lies at the northern end of a fault line and waterway running from the Irish Sea to the Moray Firth (Illus 1.1). Its peninsula separates the Dornoch, Cromarty and Moray Firths, and represents an important landfall in the maritime arena of the North Sea (Illus 1.2). Its name, gaelic *Tairbeart,* means crossing place or portage, which in this case should refer to a route for transporting boats between the firths (Illus 1.3). Well positioned for communication in a predominately maritime era, the peninsula is also favoured with natural resources: it has the relatively dry and sunny climate typical of the east coast, with a well-drained sandy soil watered by small streams and suitable for growing cereals and raising cattle (frontispiece). It has several good landing places, including the sandy beach on the Portmahomack bay, one of the most protected and accessible in the region. The present village attends the bay with the fishing port at one end and, at the other, St Colman's Church, focus of the investigation reported here (Illus 1.4).

The Tarbat peninsula is known to have been occupied from the Bronze Age or possibly the Neolithic period, and the Portmahomack site from the sixth century to the present day. The story that follows is focused on the ten centuries from about 550 to about 1550, when the site of St Colman's was successively a Late Iron Age estate centre comprising a cemetery dating to the late sixth to late seventh century, with an implied high-status settlement in the vicinity, a Pictish monastery that flourished from about 680 to 820, a farm also active in manufacture and trade between 820 and 900 and a medieval township beginning around 1100 and rising to some prominence in the fifteenth century. For ease of reference, the lives of these very different settlements are placed in a framework of four periods of unequal length (Periods 1–4), each defined by an absolute date range. The few events noted before the mid-sixth century are grouped as Period 0 and the history of the locality after 1600, mostly revealed by the church, as Period 5. The scheme is set out in Table 1.1. The colloquial terms for these periods are those in current use, but they have no great precision. The Late Iron Age in this area equates to a 'post-Roman Iron Age' and is associated with, but is not defined by, an early Pictish culture. The local people in Periods 1 to 4 could all be Picts, but here only Period 2 has its characteristic symbols. Monastic signatures are strongest in Period 2, but monastic aspirations are not ruled out of order in Period 1, or their memories in Period 3. Period 3 is 'Scotto-Norse' in the same sense that contemporary Yorkshire is Anglo-Scandinavian, acknowledging the contribution and occasional hybridisation of two cultures in conflict. This scheme takes the dated periods as fixed a priori, and leaves open to argument the question of what happened in them and how these events deserve to be described by traditional terminology. Thus although the episodes stratified in Period 2, between *c* 680 to 810, have already entered the literature as a Pictish monastery, both terms will need to be justified in the pages that follow.

In addition to its attractions for early settlers, the area has long been noted as home to a set of elaborate and individual Pictish cross-slabs carrying characteristic symbols and surviving from our Period 2 (Illus 1.5). Three great monuments once stood overlooking the firths at Nigg, Shandwick and Hilton of Cadboll (Illus 1.3; Illus 1.6). Those at Nigg and Shandwick still stand some 3m high and are in the care of local trustees; while that at Hilton of Cadboll is represented by two major pieces, the upper part in the care of the National Museums of Scotland and the lower, discovered in 2001, currently kept at Balintore. These monuments, together with those now known from Portmahomack, constitute some of the most accomplished and expressive stone carving known from early Medieval Europe (see Chapters 5.3 and 5.10).

Table 1.1
Time periods at Tarbat

Period 0	Before the mid-sixth century – *Neolithic to Iron Age* [Chapter 4]
Period 1	Mid-sixth to late seventh century – *Late Iron Age – Early Pictish* [Chapter 4]
Period 2	Eighth century – *Monastic – Late Pictish* [Chapter 5]
Period 3	Ninth to eleventh century – *Scotto-Norse* [Chapter 6]
Period 4	Twelfth to sixteenth century – *Medieval* [Chapter 7]
Period 5	After 1600 – *Post Medieval* [Chapter 7]

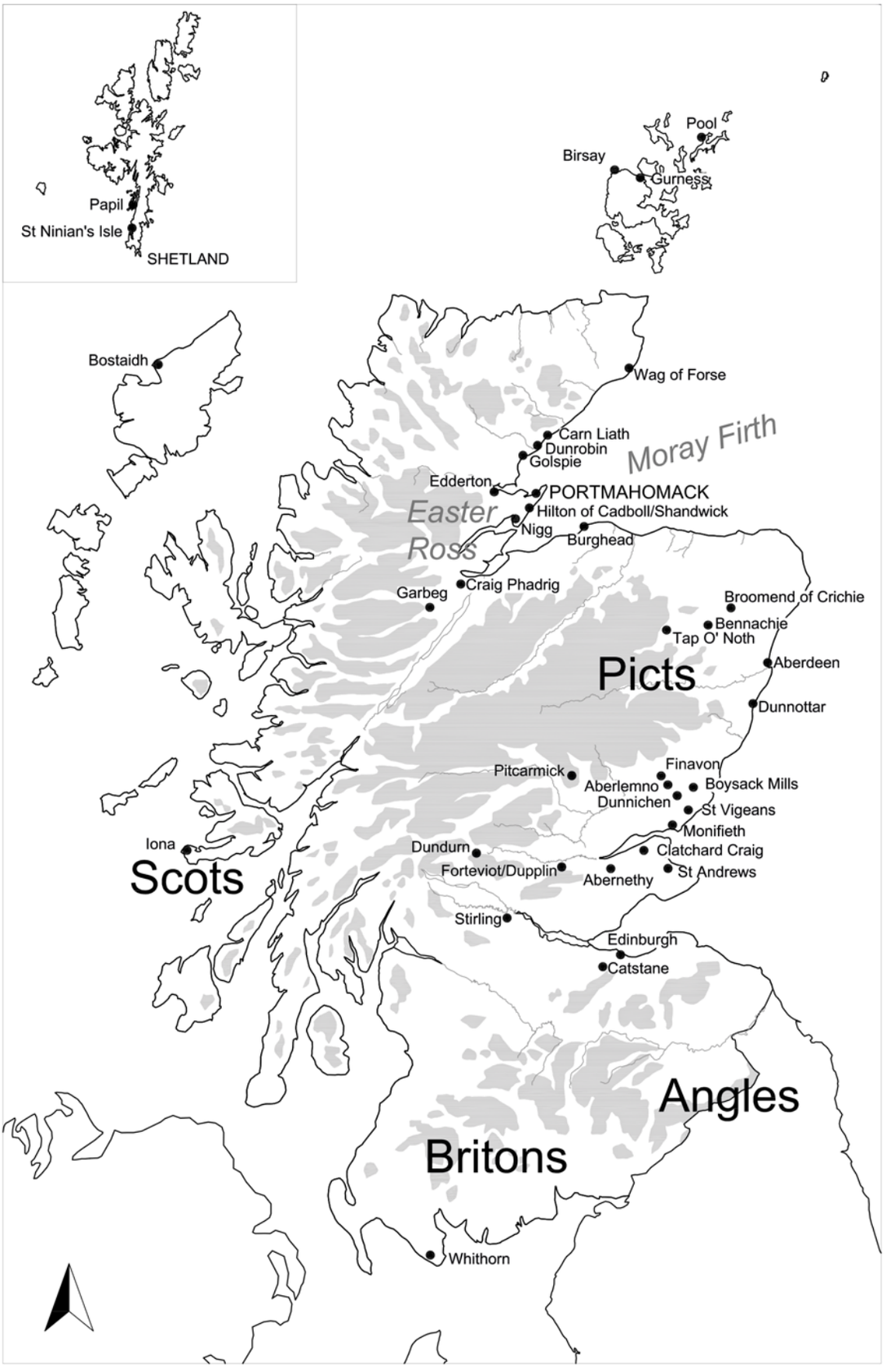

Illustration 1.1
Map of early historic Scotland, showing location of the Moray Firth and the Tarbat peninsula

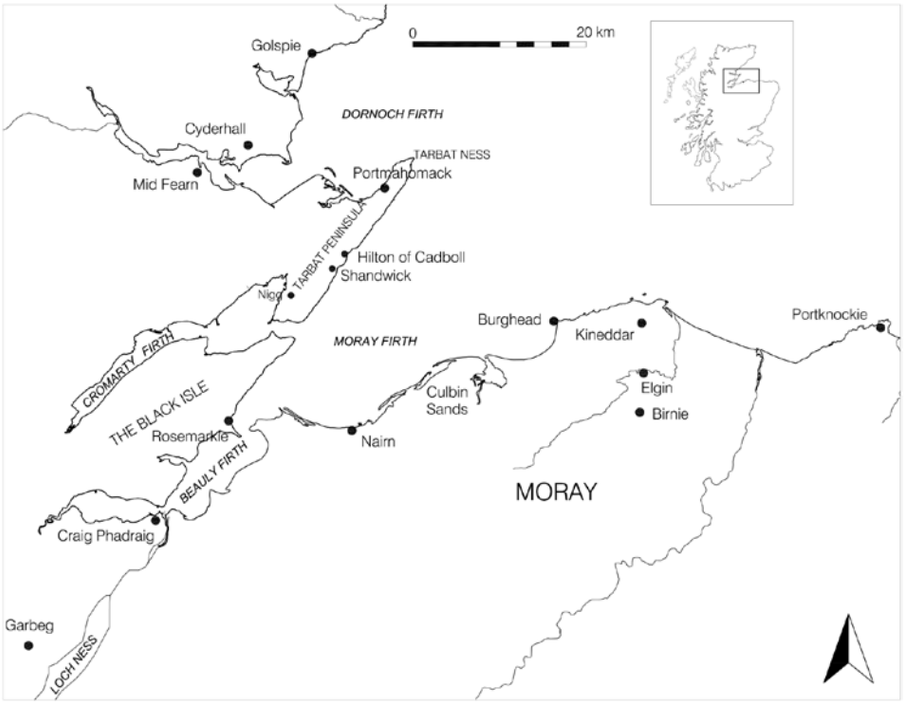

Illustration 1.2
North-east Scotland showing Portmahomack on the Tarbat peninsula in the Moray Firth

Research incentives

There were always strong reasons for placing the Tarbat peninsula among the key centres of the Pictish nation, and strong reasons too for placing the study of the Picts high on the agenda for research. The early Middle Ages, broadly the fifth to eleventh century in archaeological usage, is a watershed in European history. At the beginning of this period, lands on both sides of the Alps were under the control of imperial Rome, and its official religion and governing ethos was Christianity. By the end of the period, Europe had been rearranged into a large number of kingdoms, most of which reflected (and still reflect) the multiple loyalties of the first millennium AD. Those that were Roman provinces still remember their Roman boundaries, and sometimes those of their Iron Age predecessors; those that lay beyond the frontier remember tribal and language divisions. The eighth century, when Germanic pagan, Roman Christian and Arab Islamic ideas confronted each other with especial potency, was at the pivot of this formative process for both Britain and Europe (Illus 1.7). In theoretical terms, a system of *core and periphery*, with the core at Rome or Byzantium, had been replaced by one of *peer polity* where communities, often following different ideologies, constructed nations and alliances in pursuit of a secure, stable and prosperous future. In the course of the early Middle Ages, most of Europe's peoples endured fundamental religious or political upheavals or conversions that provided the deep-rooted basis for the cultural and intellectual complexities of modern times. The premise addressed here is that, while the trajectory of each nation-building region will be broadly reflective of the wider European narrative, each region is liable to have found an individual, experimental and eclectic solution. Therein lies the explanatory value of the experience of a particular people, in this case the Picts.

Research procedure

Archaeologists today believe that they can chronicle the aspirations of nation building through the examination of sites, monuments, artefacts and landscapes. The changing material remains of cemeteries, settlements, buildings, standing crosses and their locations represent not only levels of investment, but references to particular ways of thinking, to alliances and agendas, politics and belief; and the archaeological study of site sequences can demonstrate the way that these things changed. A great deal of the new information relevant to the task has come to light as a result of statutory investigations in advance of building; a particular success can be noted in the dozens of early medieval settlements and cemeteries that have come to light in advance of road building in Ireland with the support of the National Roads Authority. Structured research projects also have their place, since questions directly related to state formation and belief can be selectively posed and answered. While historical and archaeological thinking and theory have certainly stimulated our version of the past over the past few decades, the influence of new discoveries, investigated at an appropriate precision and scale, has been paramount.

The research goal of the project reported here was to chronicle the emergence of the northern Pictish kingdom (Illus 1.2) and its changing ideology. The broader aspiration, that the example offered by the Picts might throw light on a European phenomenon, has become increasingly plausible as the results were obtained and studied. The Pictish area is one of many in which ethnicities and religious prescriptions were being reconstructed during the period AD 500–1000, a process involving continual interaction between the parties concerned. To study a rich site within the monumental landscape of one region is one way of unlocking the deeper social, economic and ideological thinking that underlies the generalisations of cultural practice. However, both the site and landscape selected must be able to capture change.

Opportunity: The Tarbat Discovery Programme

The Tarbat project was initiated through the interests of a local group of enthusiasts (Tarbat Historic Trust) whose aim was to restore the redundant church of St Colman at Portmahomack.

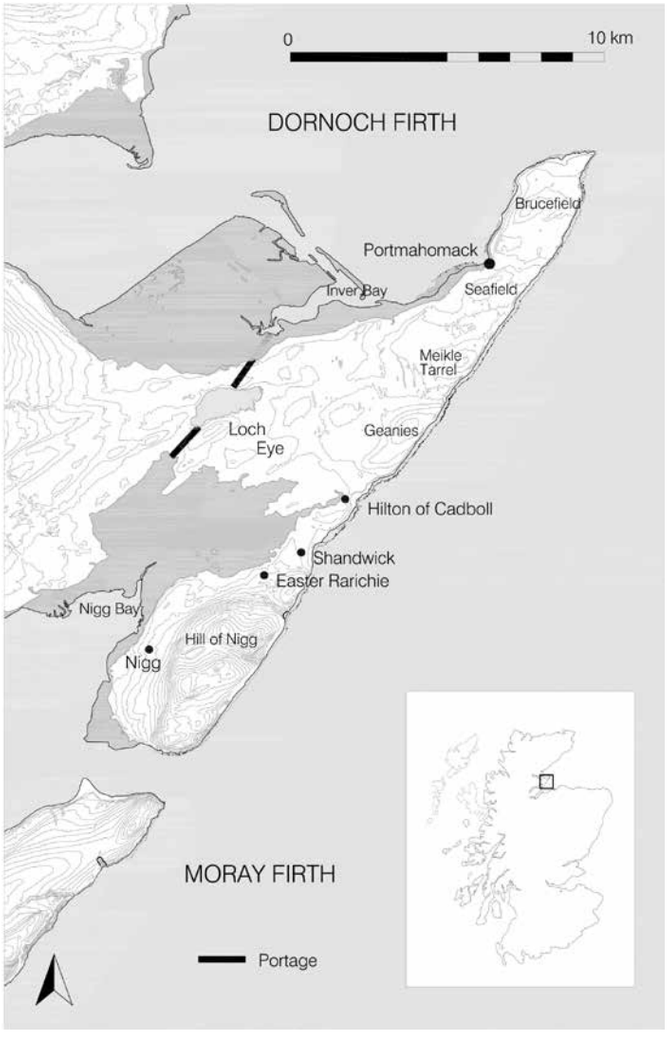

Illustration 1.3
The Tarbat peninsula, showing the chain of hilly ground, land below the 10m contour, the probable portage route (shown as a thick black line) and the location of the principal Pictish monuments (at Portmahomack, Hilton of Cadboll, Shandwick and Nigg)

Archaeological investigation was seen as one method of improving the historic value of the property and so earn support for its renewal. The archaeological research would write a new history of the area and the objects discovered could form the basis of a museum display that would in turn give the redundant church a fresh long-term social purpose. The site promised good returns. The position of the church above the beach overlooking the Dornoch Firth suggested a landing place, the valley behind the church looked good for human occupation and the presence of fragments of sculpture retrieved from the churchyard in the last two centuries hinted at the presence of a settlement of the eighth century or thereabouts. Compared to Ireland where 47,000 early medieval settlements had been located by 2014 (O'Sullivan et al 2014, 1, 49), Scotland had produced only a few documented sites tested by trial excavation (Alcock & Alcock 1987; Alcock 2003) and a handful of examples excavated to scale, at Dunadd in Argyll (Lane & Campbell 2000), Easter Kinnear and Hawkhill in Angus (Driscoll 1997), Pitcarmick in Perthshire (Carver et al 2012) and most recently Rhynie (Noble et al 2013). More ample investigations had taken place outside the Scottish and Pictish heartlands in the western or northern isles (for example at Bornais, South Uist: Sharples 1999, 2005, 2012; Old Scatness, Shetland: Dockrill et al 2010). These studies had in general defined defended places or isolated buildings within ecological, economic or social contexts that were still thinly drawn (for overviews see Ralston 1997; 2004). Mapping the detailed layout, functions, sequence and context of almost any early medieval settlement in Pictland was therefore prominent on the research agenda of the early 1990s.

Among the chance finds of carved stone in the later nineteenth century, one piece in particular (TR10) suggested a special character for Portmahomack, since it featured a Latin inscription carved in relief in insular majuscules, recalling the orthography of illuminated manuscripts of the eighth century (Illus 1.8; p 10). This rare occurence had raised the possibility that a monastery of that date lay hidden somewhere in the area (Brown, T J 1972; Henderson I H 1975; Higgitt 1982). The hypothesis was reawakened in 1984, when an aerial photograph revealed the cropmark of a ditch encircling the church on the landward side, in a manner reminiscent of that seen at Iona (Illus 1.9). A test trench dug by Jill Harden on behalf of the Tarbat Historic Trust in 1991 showed that this cropmark was that of a ditch at least 6 metres wide and 1.4 metres deep; it contained peat that returned three radiocarbon dates in the Iron Age, AD 140–590 (Harden 1995, 226, p 18), which endorsed the possibility that the cropmark around St Colman's marked out the boundary of an early medieval monastery, as proved to be the case. Although the imperative driving the present research would have been satisfied with exploring any high-status settlement, the Irish experience showed that monastic sites, although specialist by definition, often conserved informative strata, and therefore might serve the more general aim and serve it well.

The Tarbat campaign was therefore designed with the possibility of a monastery in mind, but without assuming there was one, or indeed that we knew what a monastery of the period looked like, particularly in Pictland. As our project unrolled from 1994, a new group of British monastic investigations, involving both survey and excavation, began to appear in print (Hill 1997; Cramp 2005, 2006a, 2014; Lowe 2006, 2008; McErlean & Crothers 2007; Daniels 2007; James & Yeoman 2008). This work has provided a rich seam of comparative material from which the subject and the present inquiry has benefitted immeasurably. However, when the Tarbat research design was being prepared in 1994, the archaeological landscape looked rather more bleak. Much weight was understandably given to the definitive and predictive power of early texts, in particular Adomnán's *Life of St Columba* (LC) and Bede's *History of the English Church and People* (HE), which allotted decisive roles to the Christian conviction and its missionaries. Similarly the quality and esoteric references of the great cross-slabs, which could be seen as placing their creators centrally in the intellectual forum of the day, could dazzle attempts to detect their more elusive local messages of politics, allegiance

Illustration 1.4
The village of Portmahomack and its beach, looking north (NMRS E98202, Aug 2000). St Colman's Church is the white building, lower right, with excavations in progress. It is located at NGR 915 841

and economy. Textual and art-historical studies, operating at such an assured cultural level, could assume or underplay the other diverse voices bearing on the options of the day.

Discovering the contemporary options and the responses of communities to them is archaeology's metier. But in 1994 it was falling short in three particulars, all of which affected our design. Firstly, the isolated excavation of a site carried a risk of disconnecting it from the wider geography: it required a context in space, in our case provided by a survey of the peninsula and the firthlands. Secondly, it ought not to be assumed that any site was a singular entity to be captured as a 'type' that remained valid over time: the understanding of a monument, however prominent, depended on what had happened before and what had happened since. Thus the research agenda needed to embrace the whole sequence. Thirdly, previous experience had shown that an understanding of the full range of activity required excavation at an appropriate scale. In the case of early medieval sites in Scotland, that scale would need to be large since very little had yet been seen from which to generalise.

These ideas had struck home during the Sutton Hoo Research Project (1983–1991), which immediately preceded this one and had similar aims – to chronicle the thinking of the East Anglian elite at a time of ideological change. Although the main attractions of the place were clearly the monumental barrows, their ships and rich contents, the interpretation was to be greatly affected by what was happening in other cemeteries, in the local valley and the wider region of the kingdom of East Anglia, which thereby became key parts of the project. At the site itself, what went before (the prehistory) and what came after (its use as a place of execution) were to be crucial in placing the barrows in their historical context. Accordingly, the long prelude and the aftermath were integrated into the research design, something regarded at the time as mildly eccentric (Carver 2005a, 13–32). The result was to show that one place can present different faces through the ages, acting as a barometer of exigency and political thought. The net was to be thrown wide at Portmahomack too, and was also rewarded by revealing a succession of different roles. One of these roles was monastic, but it was short lived and its other roles were to be arguably as significant and intriguing. A similar sequence of changing roles was deduced at Whithorn (Hill 1997), and has also been proposed in the post-excavation programme for the site of Flixborough in England (Loveluck 2007).

The third factor affecting the design – deciding how much to dig – was a more technical matter. The principal problem with the understanding of insular monasticism in Scotland, as with the study of Pictish sites more generally, was that they had been

Illustration 1.5
Pictish symbol: the Pictish beast on the Shandwick cross-slab

chance of new discovery is closely related to the risks taken.

It became clear that an excavation on such a scale, supported by guaranteed funding to conclusion, would be beyond the capacity (or prudence) of most conventional research funders. A collaborative partnership was the way forward, with funding at a level that would allow the employment of professional colleagues accustomed to large-scale capital projects. The natural partners here were the three bodies whose interests had already converged on the redundant church of St Colman. Tarbat Historic Trust, representing the locality, had been formed specifically to save and restore the historic church. Part of the mission of Highland Council, the local authority, was to raise the cultural profile of the region, to promote tourism and to underpin education. For the University of York, research interests were paramount but there was also a strong commitment to communicate archaeological findings to the public.

The first requirement was a scoping exercise ('site evaluation' in our terminology, see Chapter 2) so that the assets of the site could be discovered

investigated at such a small scale that no clear idea of their layout and very little of their sequence had emerged. This was particularly true of Iona, where a succession of small trenches had been permitted with little result (reviewed in O'Sullivan J, 1999). Many other examples of investigations at named or suspected monastic sites were also peremptory and uninformative, even when published. It was clear that the strategy at Portmahomack would not be worthwhile unless executed at a scale aimed at understanding its history. Since the cropmark ditch enclosed almost 3 hectares south of the church, an area close to a hectare in extent would be desirable. This in turn would have consequences of time and cost. These factors were important, since the pressure to apply selectivity is just as great in research projects as in commercial archaeology. Funds are limited and sponsors like them to be focused on the anticipated rewards that won the argument for funding in the first place. But, as with all research, the

Illustration 1.6
The Shandwick cross with the Moray Firth behind

Illustration 1.7
Western Europe in the eighth century (after McEvedy 1992), showing groups of religions principally professed: Islamic (hatched), Christian (stippled) and pagan (blank)

and the costs of realising them estimated. Of the three partners, only Highland Council had the resources to kick-start the project and it was thanks to their vision that the evaluation was funded. Encounters with structures and finds of further pieces of sculpture were sufficient to raise expectations of a major discovery and underpin a joint bid to the Scottish Heritage Lottery Fund. The goals and incentives of all three parties were interconnected. Money was to be found to restore the church of St Colman, and to give it a long-term purpose, by turning it into a museum and visitor centre. The archaeological investigation, for its part, would supply the objects and the story to create the kind of unique exhibition that could hope to make such a centre viable.

Results of the fieldwork

The full excavation began in 1997 and was completed in 2007. It comprised the excavation of a large W–E strip of the south field (Sector 1), a large N–S strip of the Glebe Field (Sector 2), a small intervention north of Tarbatness Road (Sector 3) and the interior of the church (Sector 4) (Illus 1.10). Each of these sectors was on land controlled by different owners and contained very different levels of surviving archaeological strata. In Sector 1, there was no stratification above the subsoil, but the area preserved a prehistoric field system and penannular structure, followed by enclosure ditches of the monastic period and the well-preserved footings of a unique bag-shaped building, housing metalworkers.

In Sector 2, the strata was shallow at the north and south ends, but deep and wet in the valley bottom. There were sixth/seventh-century cist burials and settlement at the north end, beside what was then a marsh. In the eighth century the stream was dammed, a pool created and a massive infrastructure laid down, including a paved road, a bridge and boundary walls. It will be demonstrated that the eighth century artisans working beside the road were making vellum. The workshops were destroyed by fire in the early ninth century, but revived after a short interval as a thriving metalworking industry. This disappeared before the tenth century. It re-emerged in the thirteenth century as a medieval village with extensive shell middens, and in the fifteenth as a township with an iron industry.

Under the church in Sector 4 the earliest activity consisted of cist burials of the sixth/seventh century, succeeded in the eighth century by a tightly controlled cemetery of adult men, many with the head-support or head-box ritual. The cemetery was used spasmodially in the ninth to eleventh century, and in the twelfth century the first definable church building (Church 2/3) was erected. It was followed by five others: Church 4 was a reconstruction of the thirteenth to sixteenth century, which provided the building with a belfry and a crypt; Church 5 was the rebuilt church of the Reformation, with a north aisle for the laird; redevelopments of the mid-eighteenth (Church 6) and late eighteenth/early nineteenth century (Church 7) provided the church with numerous additional lofts and entrances to serve its increasing population and its increasingly divided social classes. In 1843 the Free Church was formed in response to an oppressive class structure, and Tarbat Old Church reverted to a reduced pre-Reformation form (Church 8). This was essentially the church that was adapted to house our museum, dubbed the Tarbat Discovery Centre. The three sequences recorded in Sector 1, 2/3 and 4 were validated by stratification and radiocarbon dating and combined in an integrated narrative summarised in Table 1.2.

Publication strategy

The promulgation of these discoveries was at five different levels intended to serve increasingly specialised interests (Table 1.3). The Tarbat Discovery Centre was opened by HRH The Prince Charles, Duke of Rothesay, in 1999 and has continued to welcome members of the public from Europe and beyond. An interim account of the project and its findings was published in 2008 by Edinburgh University Press (Carver 2008a). The detailed accounts of the stratigraphic sequence in each sector, complete with all context, feature and find numbers, were prepared, as is the established Scottish practice, as Data Structure Reports (DSRs). These are accessible, together with the site diary and the full specialist reports, in an online archive (OLA) hosted by the Archaeology

Table 1.2
Summary of findings organised by period. S = Structure

PERIOD	**Sector 1** **South Field**	**Sector 2** **Glebe Field**	**Sector 4** **Church**	**The Peninsula**
0 **Before AD 550**				
Bronze Age		Flint arrowheads	Carved stone ball	*Short cists at Balintore, North Sutor and Balnabruach*
Iron Age		Marsh Charcoal burners' pit		*Long cists at Balintore, Nigg and Balnabruach* *Forts at Easter Rarichie, Tarrel, Lower Seafield and Castelhaven*
PERIOD 1 Fifth/seventh century AD 400–680 ***Estate centre***	*[Period 0 or 1]* *Arable farming* and cultivation Penannular structure S12	*Barrow cemetery* Cist burials *Settlement* S11 roundhouse with hearth Water-management with gulley, cistern, well and fences Plough pebbles (residual)	*Barrow cemetery* Cist burials Plain burials *Settlement* Wood-lined gulley	*Long cists on the neighbouring ridge at Portmahomack*
PERIOD 2 Eighth century *c* AD 680–810 ***Monastery***	*Enclosure* First enclosure ditch S15 Second enclosure ditch S16 *Metal-working (ecclesiastical)* Bag-shaped building S1 Hearth Metal-working in and around S15 Well S8	*Infrastructure* Pool, dam and bridge S7 Road S13 Boundary walls *Vellum working* S9 building with hearth and tools S4 washing tank Yard with hearth and bone pegs	*Cemetery* Head-support and head-box burials *Memorials* Grave markers, sarcophagus, four cross-slabs *Church?* (architectural sculpture)	*The portage?* *Monumental cross-slabs at Portmahomack, Hilton of Cadboll,* *Shandwick and Nigg*
RAID *c* AD 780–810	*No hiatus*	Buildings burnt down Sculpture broken up	*No hiatus*	
PERIOD 3 ***Trading place*** **Ninth/eleventh century** 3A Revival *c* AD 800–900	*Arable farming* S1 re-used as kiln barn S5 Kiln barn	*Metal-working (secular)* Bronze weights	*Cemetery*	*The portage?* *Norse settlement at Cadboll, Arboll, Bindal, Geanies, Shandwick*
3B Abandon *c* AD 900–1050	Disuse of enclosure ditch S16 Last use of flue in S1	Cow burial F304	*Cemetery*	*Hoard of ring-silver and coins deposited north of the church in* c *1000*

Table 1.2 (*continued*)

PERIOD	Sector 1 South Field	Sector 2 Glebe Field	Sector 4 Church	The Peninsula
HIATUS *c* 100 years				
PERIOD 4 **Medieval** **Twelfth/sixteenth century** PERIOD 4A Church 2/3 built AD 1100–1200			*Church 2/3* *Twelfth century* Bell-casting pit A single burial (117)	
PERIOD 4B Church 4 built AD 1200–1400	Ploughed fields, rig and furrow	*Village* Residence S17 & fish middens	*Church 4* *Cemetery* Grave cover mid-fourteenth century	*Foundation of Fearn Abbey & Mill*
PERIOD 4C Church 4 refurbished AD 1400–1600	Ploughed fields	*Township* Smithy S18	*Church 4* *Cemetery*	*Chapels and Holy Wells*

Data Service. This archive is free to view and contains the detailed support for every observation and identification made in this book, some of which are published here in a form that is necessarily abridged. The online archive is cited in the form 'OLA 6.1/3.2' (this being a description of the first enclosure ditch in the DSR for Sector 1).

In this book, Chapter 2 presents a description of the design and implementation of the investigation and Chapter 3 a summary of what was found and the overall argument for its phasing and dating. Table 3.1 is a concordance relating events in the three sectors. Thereafter the book follows a chronological course: Chapter 4 describes what happened on the site and the peninsula before the eighth century. Chapter 5 presents the site in its monastic mode (in the eighth century), together with its sister sites on the peninsula. It contains multidisciplinary studies of the cemetery, the sculpture, the evidence for a church, the infrastructure, the vellum workshops, the metal workshops, the agricultural economy and the architecture of the bag-shaped buildings. This chapter ends with a description of the raid that took place in the early ninth century, in which the vellum workshop was reduced to ashes and the principal cross-slabs broken up. Chapter 6 describes the revival that followed, with a new generation of industrial metal-smiths serving new masters. Chapter 7 concerns the site and peninsula in the Middle Ages, an account that includes the 850-year history of the parish church of St Colman. Chapter 8 offers a synthesis of the sequence at Portmahomack, and on the Tarbat peninsula, with a focus on the monastic package and its European significance.

Specialist studies on artefacts, human bone, stable isotopes, starch, animal bone, mammals, birds, fish, shellfish, plants, insects, stone, soils and radiocarbon dating are selectively integrated into the narratives of these chapters. The full specialist reports are contained in the online archive, accessible to all. However, for the convenience of readers, the present volume is provided with a Digest of Evidence which contains inventories and summary reports of the structures, dates, burials, sculpture, and other categories of data that are frequently referred to. Digest 9 is an index to the online archive. All the artefacts and other fnds from the excavation campaign have been declared Treasure Trove and allocated to the National Museums of Scotland, but many of the most important objects have been loaned back to the Tarbat Discovery Centre, where they may be seen. The field records are deposited in the archives of Historic Environment Scotland. Archaeological terms used in the text that follows are listed in the prelims, p xxix.

Changes from earlier publications

A number of interim accounts of the Tarbat sequence have been published over the last two decades (eg Bulletin 1–7; Carver 2004; 2006; 2008a; 2008b; 2008c). These have included some preliminary ideas that have not withstood the test of subsequent analysis, particularly on plants, animals and stable isotopes (Chapter 3). We would not now claim that the Period 1 occupation of the site in the sixth/seventh century was a Columban promotion (cf Carver 2004, 2006), although it seems

Illustration 1.8
Inscribed cross-slab fragment found in the garden wall of the manse at Portmahomack (TR10. NMS 1B286. For details see Illus 5.3.44)

to have acted as a forerunner to what followed. The cemetery sequence has been reworked with additional radiocarbon analysis, showing a clearer division between the Late Iron Age burials (before 700, Chapter 4), and the monastic burials (Chapter 5.2). The case for a Pictish church on the site of the crypt has been revised; an alternative location east of the present building is preferred in Chapter 5.4. The assumption that there was a mill in the monastic phase remains likely but unproven from the excavated evidence (Chapter 5.5). The evidence for the manufacture of vellum and church plate is fully stated in Chapters 5.6 and 5.7. The monastic economy is studied in Chapter 5.8 and a case is advanced for a capitalised system based on cattle hides. Chapter 5.9 enlarges the argument for monastic buildings constructed from turf which combine Iron Age contruction techniques with new architectural ideals. Chapter 6 describes the metalworking production of the ninth century, armed with the large number of crucibles and moulds that have been newly analysed. The importance of this episode has greatly increased with the discovery that the metal craftsmen were making weights, implying regulated trade.

The story of St Colman's Church is revisited and slightly revised in Chapter 7. The vault of the crypt as it survives is medieval, not seventeenth century, and the number of medieval and later churches has been reduced from nine to eight. The medieval village has achieved a new prominence thanks to the recent analysis. Although a medieval church stood at the site of St Colman's from the twelfth century, new analysis has revealed a fishing village next to it in the thirteenth to fourteenth century and an upsurge of activity in the fifteenth century, indicated by a major ironworking centre. Burial returns to the nave of the church in the later thirteenth or fourteenth century, and there is a surge in the fifteenth century, led by a chiefly grave accompanied by a large contingent from western Scotland (Chapter 7). Lastly, the information from the survey of the peninsula up to 2011 has been reviewed and is summarised in Chapter 4 (prehistoric sites), Chapter 5.10 (the Tarbat peninsula in Pictish times), Chapter 6 (in the ninth to eleventh century) and Chapter 7 (in the Middle Ages). The sites and place-names are listed in Digest 8.

The intensive analyses undertaken on the human, animal plant and mineral assemblages, and the radiocarbon dating, has greatly increased the value of all the discoveries. The monastic phase itself is now seen as very short, a century or less, but its range of actvity is better understood. The agricultural economy now plays a central role in the argument for the nature of the monastic phase and its political role. A hiatus can be proposed between all the major periods defined, and there are revealing differences in diet between them. All show a high and increasing rate of human mobility, with the west of Scotland, eastern Britain and Scandinavia contributing to the population.

Overview

The research conducted to date at this focal point of early Scotland has emphasised archaeology's role in discovering and describing change, and occasionally, in explaining it. The people of Tarbat experimented over millennia with different ways of living, influenced by the politics of the day and European thinking of which they were well aware. In the narrative presented here this has been compressed into a sequence of settlements of different character in the same place. Often unfamiliar in their appearance, each of these are major

Table 1.3
Promulgation of results

User	Medium	Responsible body	Contact
Members of the Public	Museum and Visitor Centre at St Colman's Church, Portmahomack	Tarbat Historic Trust	Tarbat Discovery Centre tarbat-discovery.co.uk
Students	Book: *Portmahomack Monastery of the Picts* by Martin Carver	Edinburgh University Press	euppublishing.com
General Researchers	Research Report Illustrated text (this volume)	Society of Antiquaries of Scotland	socantscot.org
Specialist Researchers	Online Archive	Archaeological Data Service (York)	ads.ahds.ac.uk
Specialist researchers of artefacts and materials	Objects in boxes	National Museums of Scotland	nms.ac.uk
Specialist researchers of sites	Records in boxes	Historic Environment Scotland	http://historic-scotland.gov.uk/historic environment scotland

achievements to which we have been obliged to give currently inadequate names. First an *estate centre*, or with a glance across to Ireland, a 'cemetery-settlement' of the fifth to seventh century (Period 1) hosts a community farming cereals, working iron and burying their dead in cist graves under barrows. This is replaced in the seventh/eighth century by a centre of exceptional cultural prominence. It features a massive new infrastructure with a pool created by a dam, crossed by a bridge serving a paved road. It had a cattle economy. Its workshops were turning out church vessels and vellum for manuscripts and a plethora of ornamental stone monuments were carved, an output as accomplished and informed as any in the Christian Europe of its time. Buried in its cemetery were those responsible: mainly middle-aged men. This settlement, defined by many of its attributes as a *monastery*, lasted little more than a century (Period 2: *c* 680–*c* 820). It was damaged by fire and many of its monuments were destroyed in what can be seen as a Viking raid – or something very like one. But the community rose immediately from the ashes to resume making metal objects, this time with a repertoire of non-ecclesistical products including weights implying trade. The subsistence of this *trading place* drew again on arable served by grain dryers. In this Period 3 (ninth to eleventh century) Tarbat is seen as situated in a war zone where Norse and Scot disputed for the legacy of the Picts, at the same time as Dane and Saxon were redrawing the territories of Britain further south. As we see it in these excavations, the end of this period (tenth/eleventh century) is possibly the bleakest of any at Portmahomack, marked by the occasional burial in the former monastic

Illustration 1.9
Aerial photograph by Barri Jones and Ian Keillar (1984), showing the enclosure ditch and St Colman's Church. The area enclosed is 2.9ha to the road along the ridge, and 8ha to the Firth

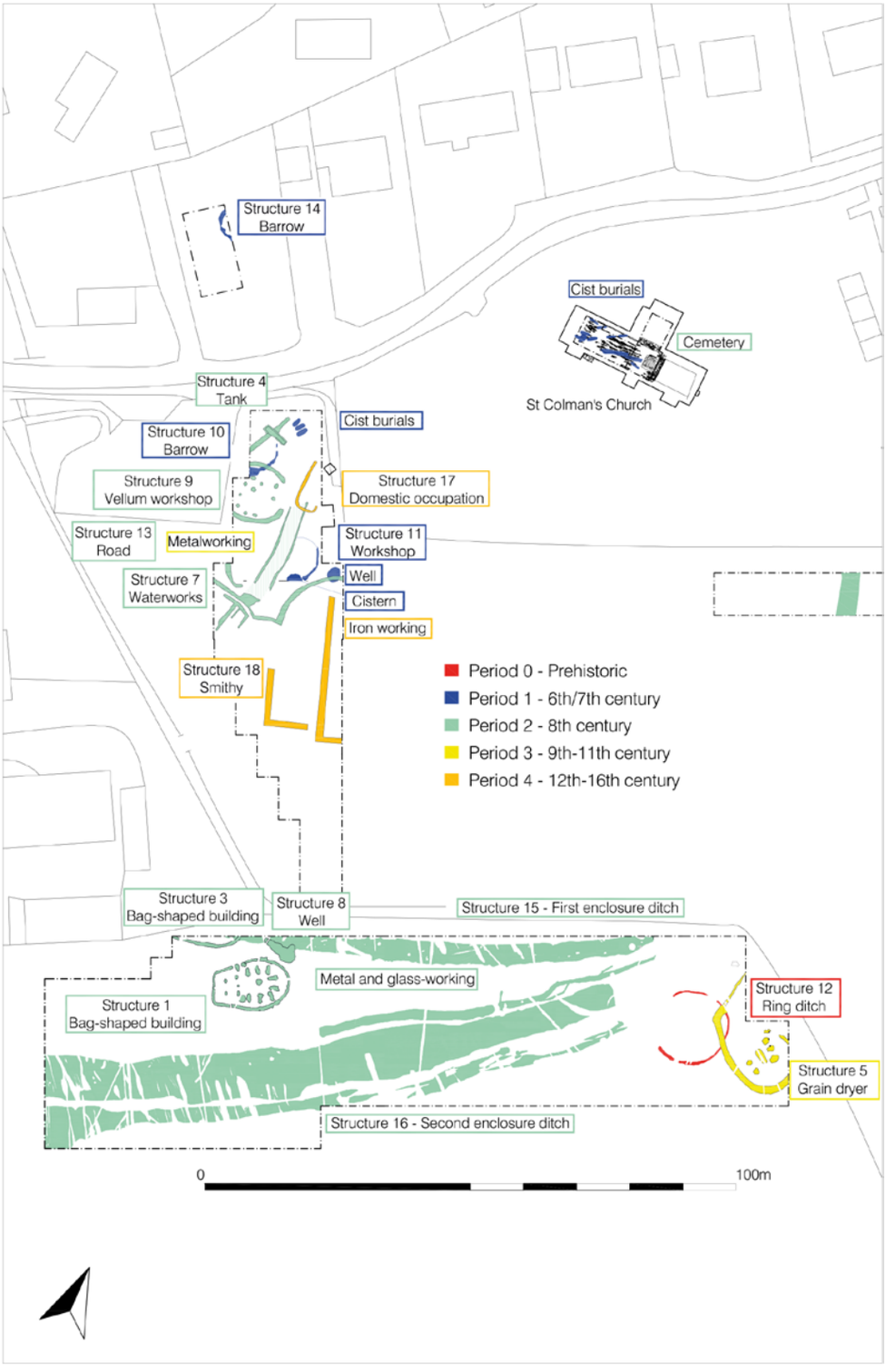

Illustration 1.10
Simplified map of site, showing all structures. The area excavated totalled 0.741ha

graveyard and the deposit of a small hoard of ring silver. Revival came in the twelfth century with the selection of Portmahomack as the site of the parish church, and still more graphically in the thirteenth when the church was extended and provided with a crypt. A village sprung up on the former workshops, piling up shell middens. By the fifteenth century there was a *township* beside the church at Portmahomack with a major iron industry.

Estate centre, monastery, trading place, township – these were prescriptions that matched the exigencies of their age. There were incomers, especially from the west, but what we plan to show here is a story of adaptation and creativity in which the people of Tarbat were always the principal players. The main purpose of the project is to capture the changes and identify the ideologies that drove them.

This book publishes the results of an integrated research project that began in 1994 and was completed in 2012. In the last few years, new research on the Tarbat peninsula has been initiated by the University of Aberdeeen in partnership with Tarbat Historic Trust. This is a welcome departure that will undoubtedly illuminate and enhance the prehistory and proto-history of an exceptional historic environment. We have not attempted to summarise or pre-empt that project here, but its design and preliminary results may be consulted on line at http://www.abdn.ac.uk/geosciences/departments/archaeology/the-northern-picts-project-259.php.