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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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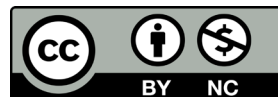
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Chapter 8

Connections

Introduction

In this book Portmahomack appears as a beacon of change, in the sense that each of its four major settlements, together with the long coda of its consecutive churches, mark pivotal moments in which politics and the economy set off in a new direction. Previous accounts of this story have tended to give the monastic phase the primacy, and for us today it probably remains the most prominent episode in the story. In reality the monastic moment may have been fleeting. What came before, and what happened after, do more than give a chronological context for one outstanding achievement. The materiality of the Portmahomack sequence suggests that the political mood changed frequently and resulted in peaks of investment followed by reaction or relapse. The family estate, with settlement and cemetery, had a brief existence in the mid-sixth to late seventh century before it was superseded, perhaps through endowment, by the massive development of the monastery. This establishment lasted a little more than a century (the eighth), before it was not so much destroyed as redirected by a Viking raid. The manufacturing and trading agenda of the new settlement lasted less than a century (the ninth). Its farmers persevered longer, but by the eleventh there were few material signs of activity at Portmahomack, apart from the occasional interment and the burial of some silver rings. With the dedication of a parish church in the twelfth century, a new era began, but it inaugurated no long-term stability. A fishing village flourished in the thirteenth century, and a colony of ironworkers served a large community in the fifteenth (Illus 8.1). The Reformation changed all that again, reordering the church and redeploing its population to the present port.

Our investigation clearly did not chronicle every eventuality in the locality or the region, so do these 'peaks' mislead us into claiming generalities? The reported changes argue principally from material culture, so offer reports no less vivid, but no less partial, than documentary history. But their value may still find some application beyond the thousand-year history of an iconic fishing village. Broader relevance may be tested by examining how far the people of Portmahomack were in contact with others; whether their remoteness was more apparent than real, their experience isolated. The aim is both to assess the historical utility of our narrative and to see if it can be in some measure explained. This chapter, drawing on the conclusions presented in Chapters 4–7, reflects briefly on the connections

of each of our communities with their locality, and with their wider world.

Mobility

We start with positive expectations. In the period with which we are mainly concerned, the sixth to sixteenth century, the people of Tarbat are of mixed descent, their responses to events widely informed. Archaeologically, cultural references and stable isotopes encourage us to accept a persistent mobility of peoples, and of ideas. In the twenty-nine samples taken from burials at Portmahomack, incomers outnumber the locally born by five to one. Most of the arrivals before the ninth century are from south and east Britain. People from the west coast appear occasionally in the early medieval population, but it is from the fifteenth century that they come in numbers. Culturally, sixth- to eighth-century Tarbat is part of the insular world. The seventh-century horse mount has its nearest parallel at Sutton Hoo in south-east England. The monastic arts make reference to works of art found in Ireland, Northumbria, Mercia and west-coast Scotland, but there is a substrate of taste in the sculpture reaching into Strathclyde and south-west Britain. In the ninth century, the Norse left a violent calling card, but two men already in the cemetery were Scandinavians and commemorated in the manner of orthodox monks. In the ninth century an Anglo-Saxon horn mount finds its way to Burghead (Graham-Campbell 1973). In the eleventh century, there are coins from England and France in circulation on Tarbat Ness. The first pottery to arrive in the Middle Ages comes from Yorkshire. Traffic moves as readily up and down the east coast by ship, as it does between east and west using the Great Glen and its portages (McCullough 2000; Phillips 2006). From the time of the eighth-century monastery, if not before, Picts, Britons, Scots, Irish, English and Norse, and no doubt others besides, are potentially active in the Moray Firth.

Prehistoric to Pictish transitions

There are Bronze Age sites on the Tarbat peninsula, but the Middle Iron Age there awaits definition. There are few Roman finds (Digest 8), so we have difficulty aligning with that transition to Pictishness being chronicled by Fraser Hunter at Birnie (2007, 51). There, two hoards of Roman coins were deposited in the late second/early third century AD in an Iron Age settlement of turf-

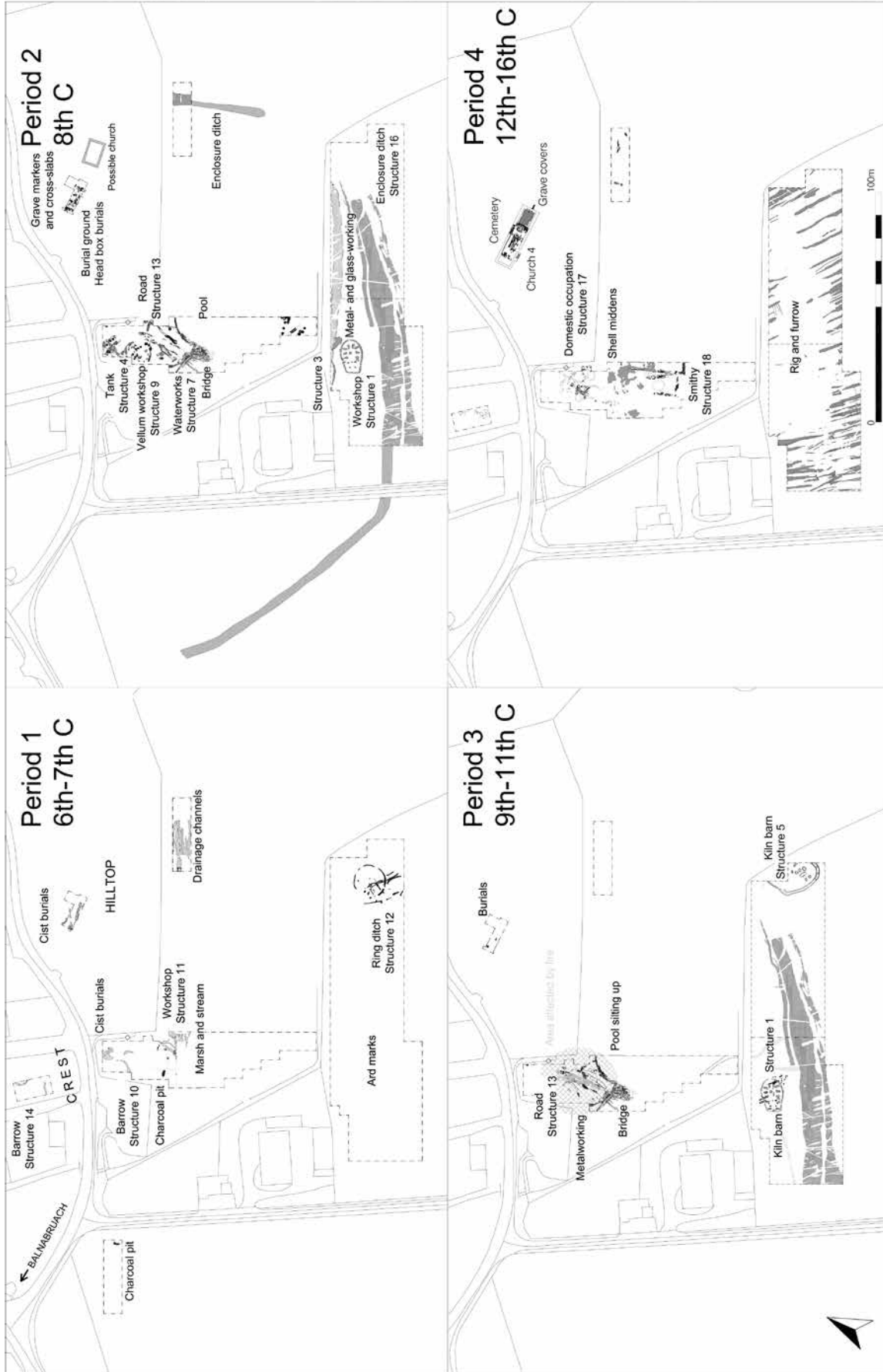


Illustration 8.1
The sequence at Portmahomack, Periods 1-4

built roundhouses, one destroyed by fire. This is seen to have begun a shift from locally based power (as at Birnie) to fortified centres in the fifth/sixth century (Hunter 2007, 32, 54). This move to the ramparts has been endorsed by new research, exposing a varied typology of fortified hilltop and coastal sites in this period over wider Aberdeenshire (Cook 2011).

The chronological framework adopted here ends the Middle Iron Age about 400, and the Late Iron Age about 650 (Maldonado 2011, 98, 123, 127), this latter period also being named ‘early Pictish’ on the grounds that it is coincident with the appearance of the incised symbol stones. Thanks to the revelations at the high-status ritual centre excavated at Rhynie, Aberdeenshire, which originally contained nine of these symbol stones, we can be reasonably certain that this iconographic system was established in a non-Christian society in the fifth to seventh century, even if Christianity subsequently adopted some of its imagery (Gondek & Noble 2010; Noble et al 2013; Carver 1999a). These stones may have been erected in response to incoming Christians: ‘the stones lack Christian iconography and may have been erected as a pagan reaction against the influence of these new beliefs, whether due to the successes of the sub-Roman or the Columban church’ (Foster 1996, 79, moderated by idem 2004, 75–6; revived by Clarke 2007 and Fraser & Halliday 2011, 327, 330). However, the Rhynie site suggests that Picts needed no prompting from Christianity to create their own cult sites and symbolic language, their investment in monuments promoting their own cosmology rather than emulating that of the neighbours. In this, their spiritual trajectory is more akin to that of Scandinavia (cf Hedeager 2011).

Early Pictish Portmahomack was not enclosed or fortified and has to date produced no Class I symbol stones. Along the crest that is now marked by Tarbatness Road there were burials from the fifth century and before, culminating in the sixth to seventh century in a cemetery of long-cist graves, some aggregating in clusters, a number of them covered by earth mounds. Some of these barrows remained visible and continued to exert a gravitational pull even on monastic head-box burials through the eighth and into the ninth century. In this sense, there was a *longue durée* in the sanctity of the place. Complementary examples may be seen in maps of the peninsula, where later Christian sites join earlier burial grounds at Nigg, Shandwick and Balintore/Hilton, although, since all are landing places, geography will also have played its part (Illus 8.2).

Behind the cemetery, in the marshy valley, was a circular building providing shelter for smiths, working with iron and collecting water. On the hilltop beside the graves a wood-lined gully containing grain suggests an economy in which rye, wheat and barley were staples. Plough pebbles residual in the settlement and an acre of scratch-plough marks to the south are possibly related to this cereal production. There were hints of high status and exotic contact in the exiguous finds: disc-headed iron dress pins paralleled in southern England, and the harness mount which finds its closest match on the ornamental disc of the bridle from Mound 17 at Sutton Hoo. The isotopes also report a well-travelled bunch: one local, one westerner and one from ‘east Britain’ but not local, which is a catch-all for somewhere on the east coast further south (p 60).

In AD 565 Columba undertook his expedition up the Great Glen, of which the Tarbat peninsula is a geological extension. The dates of our cist graves embrace this iconic year. It would be historically satisfying to grant the Period 1 settlers the status of early Christian pioneers, led or inspired by a mission from Iona; it would be logical for such a mission to head for a traditional holy place. But there was little overtly Christian or monastic about the Period 1 people, with their mixed sexes, self-serving ornament and lack of crosses. Admittedly, the ascetic reputation of the early monks does not promise much visibility and it is even possible that our informal cluster of multi-taskers is what a formative Columban community looked like. However, at the present state of knowledge it would be prudent not to force a Columban straitjacket on the Period 1 settlers at Portmahomack (*pace* Carver 2004). They were persons of both sexes owning items of equestrian rank successfully practising mixed farming with access to metals and a strong Iron Age burial tradition. The change which was to occur in the late seventh century is sufficiently dramatic to credit it to incomers, but there is no special indication of their presence in the cemeteries. It is argued that the transition is what might be expected where a landowning family donates land to endow a monastery (Chapter 4).

From family estate to monastery

A light dusting of windblown sand, possibly due to turf stripping, separates the first settlement at Portmahomack from what followed it in the late seventh or early eighth century (Period 2; Illus 8.1). The new development had a revolutionary character from its inception. An infrastructure was created, involving major earthworks: the stream in the valley was dammed, creating a pond; a paved road led down the hill from the crest and over a bridge to the previously ploughed arable land beyond. The new property was demarcated with a first, and soon afterwards a second, deeper, enclosure ditch that embraced the valley, the crest and the beach onto the Dornoch Firth. Infrastructure and buildings were contrived from local materials: stone slabs and turf. The road was paved in sandstone flags with beach cobbles forming the kerb, and V-shaped roadside ditches. The boundary walls were built with stone and turf layers and founded on bones where they crossed a wet patch. The dam was a dump of clay, branches and stones; the culvert was made of smooth stone slabs fitted like a long box with tight joints; the bridge was compounded of megalithic clapper stones over the culvert and (probably) oak beams on edge-on stones over the outwash (Chapter 5.5).

Beside the road were yards, where hides and skins were processed for the manufacture of vellum (Chapter 5.6). At the southern edge of the enclosure was an area dedicated to working glass and precious metals, destined for objects paralleled in ecclesiastical contexts, such as the chalice, paten or reliquary (Chapter 5.7). It was served by the extraordinary building S1 with its ‘sporan-shaped’ plan, probably roofed with timber uprights on pads and wrapped around with a turf jacket. Its complex symmetrical layout, – a semicircle joined to a trapezium – featured an intriguing metrology, but also made references to the architecture of the Iron Age roundhouse and its porch (Chapter 5.9). The references here are to the new learning and invention

of the insular world of Britain and Ireland, with a background counterpoint inherited from the Iron Age.

On the hill there may (or may not) have been a church (Chapter 5.4) but there was certainly a cemetery. The new burials were added to earlier cist graves in the same place, but the burial ground was now constrained in its boundaries. The characteristic new rite consisted of small stone slabs placed by the head or body or encasing the head, and the graves were oriented W–E and place side by side in N–S rows (head-box burials; Chapter 5.2). There were stone grave markers, many simple and geometrical, featuring little more than the cross. But there were more lavish memorials too. A recumbent monolith with images of a boar and lion was probably the lid of a sarcophagus. Monuments were created on an increasingly massive scale, with three great cross-slabs erected in the later eighth century and a cross-shaft at the end of the eighth or beginning of the ninth. These ceremonial crosses were placed at the edges of the inner precinct, where the existence of a church is strongly signalled by fragments of architectural sculpture (Chapters 5.3). The accomplishment and grandeur of these monuments is matched only by those erected at Hilton, Shandwick and Nigg at the same time (Illus 8.2). Together they proclaim the initiation of a major high-investment project that embraced the whole peninsula and was international in outlook (Chapter 5.10). The allegiance of the monuments was multiple: a huge cross on one side, a name writ large in Pictish symbols on the other, argued here to signify a holy person, celebrated in an anecdotal hagiographical image. The ornament refers to exemplars from Ireland, Northumbria, Mercia and also Strathclyde and Cumbria. References to Rome operated here at a more muted level, perhaps in the form of the road.

This enterprise was operated by a specialised group, if we are to assess it from those buried on the hill. With minor exceptions, they were all adult males, some elderly. Of the seven tested, three were locally born, two from elsewhere on eastern Britain and two were of Scandinavian origin, the latter not buried with head-boxes but placed together and integrated into a row. There was no one from the west in the sample. This endorses the impression of an international project, with Pictish ownership. The model of an indigenous response to an exotic initiative is also exemplified by the ingenious ways in which the occupants met the demands of new ritual. Lacking lime for preparing vellum, they synthesised it from seashells and seaweed. Lacking high-grade fuels they recycled animal bone as ‘bone coal’. They probably obtained oil for lamps or chrism from seals, dolphins and whales. No amphorae reached Tarbat, so another form of container (skin?) or another form of wine (barley?) must have supplied the Eucharist.

The economy was built on cattle, with pigs and goats also providing some meat (Chapter 5.8). Barley was cultivated, but most of the expected fruits, berries, nuts and vegetables eluded detection. Some fish and shellfish were eaten, but the diet of all the tested individuals was based on terrestrial protein and with little seafood. The cattle were slaughtered late, having provided milk, butter, cheese and pulling the plough and carts. Calves were slaughtered to provide vellum. The economic assessment was that the establishment was more than self-sufficient. Spiritual benefits could be purchased by endowment, and once the community had

the run of the peninsula, there was grazing and arable enough to support labourers, smiths, sculptors and artisans on a food-for-output basis. All this was done for the greater glory of God, but the institution would need to acquire resources from outside the region, principally precious metals, and assuming these were not donated, a food surplus would need to be converted into commodities to pay for them. It is argued (Chapter 5.8) that the most likely form of currency was the tanned cattle hide, a form of wealth that could be created locally, stored and transported, and provided an essential material for dressing, fighting, riding, sailing and drinking.

The interpretation of eighth-century Portmahomack as a monastery, and of Tarbat as its territory, is based on its single-sex cemetery, the output of its workshops, its economy, and its huge collection of carved stone monuments with Christian and in one case (Nigg) specifically monastic references to St Paul and St Anthony. The emphasis on ritual in burial, stone carving, architecture, and the manufacture of books and ecclesiastical vessels suggests this was a monastery which in its heyday formed part of the wider insular network and shared its values and promoted its agenda. How did these ideas get to Easter Ross?

Monastic origins

The rationale of founding a monastery at that particular time and place can be sought in the activities of missionaries, or in terms of previous ritual practice, or as part of a wider trajectory, which (it will be argued) is not only ideological but political and economic. Portmahomack is not mentioned in any early record and its founders are unknown. Its church was medieval and is dedicated to St Colman. Among the numerous bearers of this name was the Bishop of Lindisfarne who was on the losing side at the Synod of Whitby in 664, and thereafter travelled with his companions via Iona to set up monasteries in his native Ireland (HE IV.4). He is not known to have been active in Pictland, but may have been celebrated there at the turn of the century; or his dedication at Portmahomack may have been retrospective. Many named champions of monastic and ‘apostolicist’ (pro-Roman) Christianity were active about the time that the Tarbat monastery was founded, including Adomnán at Iona (Fraser 2009, 220). Some Irish intervention in Easter Ross is still probable; but given the later date (more than a century after Columba) for the material beginning of the monastery, the lack of imported pottery, and the presence of an eighth-century sceat, the odds have shortened on a Northumbrian initiative. Nechtan’s embassy of 710 to Ceolfrid (HE V.21) will have opened or enlarged the dialogue with Northumbria. Perhaps an agent was the shadowy Curadán-Boniface (Macdonald A 1992); but a more attractive candidate for the local mover and shaker is the Hendersons’ suggestion of the energetic Egbert. An Englishman sworn to permanent exile, he was a tireless advocate of unified monastic practice and a transporter of books and relics, on both sides of the Channel and the Irish Sea (Henderson & Henderson 2004, 216, 223). Egbert was a bridge builder, champion of *peregrinatio* and sponsor of continental missions (by Wictbert and Willibrord) (Levison 1946, 44, 53). In AD 714 he was inspired to abandon a trip to Germany and go instead to Iona where he was instrumental in

uniting the community with the Roman project in AD 716. Here he died thirteen years later aged ninety (HE V.22). Bede notes that this inspiring teacher and diplomat at the hub of an international intellectual network also lived some of his voluntary exile among the Picts (HE III.27).

Not knowing who built or led the monastery at Portmahomack urges us to look for other clues. The basic necessities required from a donor are a parcel of land and a herd of cattle; this would keep the community alive, and from this a surplus could eventually be generated. Subsequent hints as to where the monastic inspiration is coming from should lie in the layout, the art and the nature of the people in the cemetery. Nearly all the indications are equivocal.

Layout

The choice of site and the settlement morphology could provide pointers on whether local roots and old loyalties are being reconciled. Wearmouth and Jarrow seemed to have been founded on unexploited land (Cramp 2005, 23), but in the more northern and western areas there is more of an expectation that monasteries will refer in some way to what had gone before (Edwards & Lane 1992, 10). At its most basic, Celtic monastic sites follow prehistoric exemplars, while Anglo-Saxon monasteries follow Roman ones (Loveluck 2007, 201; Carver 2008c, 20–2). The exemplars in Scotland are not easy to pin down, but there are numerous examples in Ireland of the ‘religious re-education’ of prehistoric monuments (Swift 2000, 17–20; 29–31) and a case has been occasionally advanced for a spiritual alignment between monasteries and their Iron Age collegiate predecessors in Scotland too (Burn 1969; Carver 2009a).

Another way of defining the roots of monastic layout is to draw them not from earlier religious sites or contemporary cosmology, but from contemporary princely settlement. This is not easy as there are so few to cite, and in Scotland it seems likely that many will be constrained by fortification as at Dunadd (Lane & Campbell 2000) or the upland sites defined in Aberdeenshire (above; Cook 2011). In England the problem lies in distinguishing between aristocratic and monastic settlement; seemingly all are essentially ‘minsters’ (Blair 1996; Blair 2005, 266 et seq). In this light Tim Pestell has warned that with an excess of minsters ‘we face the dangerous possibility of seeing an emerging Anglo-Saxon landscape governed at all its key, nodal, points by the Church, rather than the aristocracy and secular rulers who lived and died in the pursuit of power, and who were the church’s sponsors’ (Pestell 2004, 59). Alternatively, as more monastic correlates are claimed by princely sites (like styli) we can start to believe that there is no distinction between them (Carr et al 1988). This may be a product of difficult archaeology, as suggested by those sites where the two modes have been defined in different stratigraphic phases as at Flixborough (Loveluck 2001, 2007). That is not to say that one phase should always feed directly from the other. The monastic layout may emulate an axial princely layout, as at Yeavinger (Blair 2005, 199–200), which may be owed in turn to a prehistoric exemplar (Hamerow 2012, 106). But neither need wholly wrest the primacy from more intellectual imperatives, such as the emulation of a quadrilateral

Roman ‘villa’ at Jarrow (Cramp 2005, Fig 24.3) or the prehistoric symbolism of the triple oval enclosure at Nendrum (McElearn & Crothers 2007, 393). The ‘archaeology of difference’ allows for many ideas to compete, but often one idea will be seen, from the material emphasis, to emerge and dominate, if only briefly.

If there can be said to be a Scottish model, it is neither oval nor quadrilateral, but the shape of a flattened C, with its terminals in water, either of the sea (Iona), a river (Hoddum) or a firth (Portmahomack). At Portmahomack the church on the hill had an early (if undated) oval churchyard, and the proposed siting of the crosses mark it out (Chapter 5.3). Those approaching from the valley and the metal workshop entered a craft area dedicated to hides and vellum, via a bridge and passing through boundary walls. The road continued upwards towards the site of church and cemetery. These are hints that the interior was partitioned with the kind of concentric arrangement seen at Clonmacnoise. But at present it has to be said that we have very few monastic layouts, and remarkably few convincing enclosures. More grievous still we have very few princely settlements to compare them with. In this state of knowledge it would be incautious to generalise, other than noting that permanent settlements require water, drainage, good soil and a landing place. Perhaps monastic communities shared a talent for discovering and adapting suitable sites, each in its own way.

In the heyday of the monastic achievement, the peninsula itself can be said to have adopted a layout, its territory marked by grand cross-slabs at the landing places (see above). Each of these have, or once had, a view over a different piece of sea, and conversely would have acted as a seamark for travellers coming from the Cromarty Firth (Nigg), from Moray (Shandwick), from the northern Moray Firth (Hilton) and from the Dornoch Firth (Portmahomack). Since each of these was sited at an ancestral burial ground and since each is argued to represent a particular saintly dedication, it can be surmised that they acted as devotional stations around which the community and its visitors may process. In this they have drawn inspiration from the kind of sacred landscape mapped at Inishmurray (O’Sullivan & Ó Carragáin 2008).

Attributes

Assembling the elements of the monastic package in new territory will have presented more challenges than merely creating a working farm. In our case, there are ritual necessities that are novel, and would have to be imported, like writing and Christian iconography, while others rely on imported material, like precious metals; others must be imported as a concept, but can be built according to local preference, like watermills and churches, others can be learnt but resourced and executed locally, like vellum-making. Other ritual investments are rooted in the local past, but adapted to the needs of Christianity, like the standing stones, a feature of the landscape since the Bronze Age. Sculptural experts could be recruited from their previous profession making Class I stones and rapidly trained (no doubt with imported masters as well as imported motifs). They emerged within a century as top-of-the-range artists with an innovative repertoire. This second phase of Pictish carving, with cross-slabs squared and carved in relief (Class II), gathered the spiritual

and Ribe 1. Here raw materials are brought in from abroad, for example glass, and the products, for example beads, are traded over long distance. These sites are no longer constrained by their spirituality, but embrace a new commercial ‘mentality’ (Skre 2012, 55). Their analogues in south England are *wics* or emporia (Pestell & Ulmschneider 2003; Jørgensen 2003; Skre 2008; 2012). After 800, in a third phase, there emerge real towns, the four permanent producer and trader sites of Hedeby, Birka, Ribe and Kaupang (Skre 2012, 57).

In an earlier model, Doherty (1985) cited the monastery as a prime mover in urban development, a good idea that became rather entangled in the debate over the sense in which the early Irish monastery actually was ‘a town’ (Clarke & Simms 1985), as opposed to the phases in which it manifested urban trends. Doherty himself emphasised that the process was evolutionary, citing the pull of prehistoric cult centres and the demonstration owed to Paul Wheatley that the origins of cities in *all* the regions of primary urban generation could be traced back to a ceremonial complex as opposed to a citadel or market place (Doherty 1985, 46). By the seventh/eighth century, the monastery had achieved a monopoly of endowments and donations, and by 800 its centrality is well established (*ibid.*, 54). By 900 public buildings and open spaces had been added around the sacred precinct, and ‘the cult centre itself was at the centre of a complex redistributive system’ (*ibid.*, 60, 66).

Recent studies of the monastic outcome in France offer a different trajectory although still related in that it involves monasteries acting as creators of wealth and agents of political change. Stéphane Lebecq shows that, from their foundation in the fifth/sixth century, the monasteries of central and southern Europe were located on the busy routes, in the shadow of the city walls. Even Fulda, said to have been founded in a *horrendum desertum*, was actually placed in a fiscal estate with a monumental Merovingian villa at its centre. By the seventh century, aristocrats were endowing monasteries with vast estates together with the men who worked them (2000, 127–30; see also Dell’Acqua 2001). The monasteries felt the need to acquire additional property by the sea, including salt flats for grazing and making salt, and coasts for fishing and hunting marine mammals ‘much sought after for their meat, for their bones and especially for their blubber’ (Lebecq 2000, 131). Monasteries could easily become economic centres and after they became beneficiaries of tolls and tithes in the eighth century, they also became centres for redistribution and the resale of surplus (*ibid.*, 138). Monasteries are recorded as having their own merchants who plied the routes with their pack animals, carts and boats, bringing back furs, fabrics, ambers and illuminated gospel books (*ibid.*, 146–8).

Joachim Henning’s archaeological inquiry asked when and how far monasteries were actually engaged in manufacture, as opposed to attracting gifts and exchanging benefits. He catalogued every example of craft in central Europe and found that while there was only one example of a monastic production site in the seventh century (at St Denis), this shot up to eighteen in the eighth and declined again to six in the ninth. Examples of eighth-century production sites included Fulda (glass-working, bronze casting, combs), Corvey (glass, bronze) and Lorsch (glass, combs). He concluded that during the eighth century, monasteries

were on a par with the *wics*/emporium to the north and did the same kind of things, under a different ideological governance (Henning 2007, 18).

This is not to deny initiatives to the aristocrat (Wickham 2005, 760–7, 818; Hodges 2012) or the enterprising merchant (Theuvs 2012, 34; McCormick, M 2001; 2007, 44; 2012), who surely had a finger in every promising pie. It is only to say that monasteries were players in the economy and politics of eighth-century Europe; and in some places, particularly the Gallic and Celtic west, were the dominant economic force. Even in our age it would not be inconceivable to have the political agenda set by religious conviction rather than by wealth creation or a king. As argued above, the cult sites of the north and east seem to morph readily into trader-led establishments, manifestations of an ideological revolution that helps to give the early Viking wars an economic context (Carver 2016).

The return of commercial imperatives

The European turn towards commerce, even within monasteries, provides a context for our site in Period 3. Admittedly the ‘turn’ was here somewhat enforced, since the Portmahomack monastery offers convincing evidence for destruction by Vikings in the late eighth/early ninth century. A major fire consumed the northern workshops and carved stone monuments were broken up and tipped onto the smouldering ruins (Chapter 5.11). One or two of the inmates died of sword wounds. After only a short interval, the settlement revived, with some continuity but also with a change of character (Period 3; Illus 8.1). Burial, including head-box burial, continued on the hill and made use of existing grave-rows for another century; and those buried are still only men. A new workshop of metal-smiths sprang up over the ruins of the vellum workers. They used the same technology as their predecessors had in the southern workshops (moulds, crucibles and bone coal). The metal workers chucked their debris into the pool, which still held water. They repaired the road, presumably to maintain access to the southern fields, where the conversion of the former metalworkers’ hall to a kiln barn showed the new priorities in Sector 1. Another heated building associated with grain was constructed further east. These farmers were now less concerned with cattle, and were growing grain. The change from pasture to arable, from cattle to grain, from the manufacture of symbolic to consumable goods and from spiritual benefits to commerce seems to epitomise the transition from Period 2 to Period 3.

The transformation of the vellum workshops into a manufactory included the production of weights, two of which are related to the Scandinavian network. It may have been the virtual absence of coins that urged the adoption of weighed bullion (Wastling in Evans & Loveluck 2009, 422) or the rationale of exchange itself might have changed to one more suited to constant bargaining (Hinton 1996, 60, 100). The change from cattle to arable farming suggests the commoditisation and distribution or sale of a grain surplus to support dependencies or allies (McCormick F 2008). Similar transitions would appear to have taken place at Wearmouth/Jarrow. The workshops of Building D at Jarrow remained in use and their occupants

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continued to handle coins there into the ninth century (Cramp 2005, 219–29). They were now making or using strap ends (CA35) and hooked tags (AG1-2; CA36) (Cramp 2006, 230, 234). Professor Cramp comments; ‘the latest phases of the workshops alongside the river confirmed that the functions of these areas changed through time and that monasteries were not static entities, but reflected changing economic strategies’ (2005, 360). She sees a lower level of commitment to the monastic project after 800, symptom of a society destabilised by the Viking raids.

Perhaps the Period 3 establishment at Tarbat could also be seen as the continued existence of the monastery in another guise. Could its occupants have been the same people in new robes, a genus of ‘adaptable monks’ who, like the Vicar of Bray, recognised what was necessary for survival, and signed up to it? At Clonmacnoise, the early settlement of the seventh to eighth century was reorganised and expanded between the ninth and eleventh century, with the industrial working of antler, bone stone, lignite, bronze, glass, silver and possibly gold (King 2009, 333). While the seventh/eighth-century phase had an emphasis on mature cattle (McCormick & Murray 2007, 213), the ninth-century expansion was reflected in an increased exploitation of red deer. The exploitation of antler and output of metal products resembles that of Dublin and has accordingly been declared ‘urban’ (King 2009, 338; Soderberg 2004a; 2004b). The examples from Ireland and Northumbria support the idea that monasteries such as Iona, Clonmacnoise and Jarrow, while not ‘urban’ in any useful sense, were engaged in the generation of surplus through the management of cattle and later with some symbolic dividend – red deer, the ‘wild cattle’ (Soderberg 2004a).

But this is not quite what happened at Portmahomack. Numbers of red deer decreased. The smiths made themselves at home, but their order book was meeting different demands – pins, belt plates and weights. The scale is not urban and only just industrial. Unlike at Clonmacnoise no more sculpture was made. The smiths worked on a carpet of smashed-up sculpture laid as hard-core, adapting some of the carved fragments to line a drain. This does not seem consistent with a devotional community of the kind

that contained staunch believers, prepared to die to protect a reliquary. If local people turned to manufacture and commerce this was a survival strategy made necessary by the age.

The adaptability of some members of the community and the dispersal of others is consistent with a period of war. The



Illustration 8.4
Insular places mentioned in the text

PORTMAHOMACK ON TARBAT NESS

background, obscure as it is, suggests that Scots and Norse fought for the control of the Firthlands through the ninth to eleventh century, and the Picts lost to both. We can guess that lands formerly within the monastic estate were redistributed to new owners, ostensibly given Norse names (Arboll, Bindall, Cadboll, Geanies, Shandwick; Illus 8.2). However the main post-Pictish legacy in this part of the east coast was not Norse but Gaelic. The Moray Firth as a whole became a Scottish province, repelling the Earls of Orkney and extinguishing Pictish culture. Tarbat itself is among the places named in Gaelic, one of the few indications that the portage remained, or became, of importance in the ninth century.

The reborn settlement at Portmahomack occupied a strategic location in the long struggle for mastery of north-east Scotland, but it was not itself active for long. Metalworking beside the pool is unlikely to have endured beyond the ninth century, and the same is argued for most of the burials (not many now) that were interred in the church. In *c* AD 1000, a hoard of silver buried on the hill contained English and Frankish coins and Scandinavian ring money. This speaks of the new opportunities offered by a North Sea maritime market place, or perhaps of the end of them. In 1035 a sea battle was fought at Torfness showing that, as in contemporary England, the competition to control Britain and decide its political direction was far from over.

In the absence of a documentary notice, whether the monastery at Portmahomack was actually destroyed by Vikings is likely to remain beyond proof. Ó Floinn (1998, 98) warns, 'the evidence from Clonmacnoise and elsewhere cautions against generalising about the effects of, say, Viking raids on artistic activity at monastic sites. Each must be examined separately to establish the local conditions within its region at a given time.' This sensible advice actually catches the mood of current archaeological research, which is essentially to let every site tell its own story rather than search for ways to conform to a generalised picture. Nevertheless it can be accepted for north-east Britain that Viking raids on monasteries were a feature of the late eighth and early ninth century, after which much ecclesiastical land appears to have passed into the hands of the laity (Pestell 2004, 74). That is not to say that the laity were necessarily different people. A natural survivor will throw off one robe and put on another, driven by the ideas of the day.

Some modern readers will find it possible to see the Viking raids as liberating, a prelude to a new commercial principle that released energy and opportunity from the lower levels of society, and not necessarily only in those of the Viking persuasion. Had

Easter Ross become fully Norse, like Orkney and Shetland, these opportunities might have broadened. The trajectories described above suggest that even in the most rigid and ascetic institutions there were trends towards intercepting the stream of wealth. The transition from a monastic to a commercial centre was not therefore only a matter of external force. Monasteries and wics differ most in whom they primarily serve: God, the market or the king. Taking sides is therefore about which ideology is espoused, and the alliances are more political than ethnic. For some, the new dispensation is resisted unto death. For others one kind of service supplants another.

It is not straightforward to assign an ideological stance to the incoming Scots. Some no doubt signed up to the enterprise culture and became merchant adventurers, while others



Illustration 8.5

Europe with locations of selected places mentioned in this book. For citations in text please see index. 1. Portmahomack; 2. St Ninian's Isle, Shetland; 3. Birsay, Orkney; 4. Clonmacnoise, Ireland; 5. Sutton Hoo; 6. Helgö; 7. Birka; 8. Tissø; 9. Kaupang; 10. Hedeby; 11. Domburg (Rhine estuary); 12. Ribe; 13. Fulda; 14. St Denis; 15. Castelseprio; 16. Bobbio; 17. Malles; 18. Rome; 19. Ravenna; 20. Byzantium

transferred with their monastic treasures to Ireland. In the Moray Firth we hear only of kings and battles, on which there is a persuasive opinion that the Pictish powers were eliminated through violent Scottish conquest (Wormald 1996; Chapter 1, p 11). To date, archaeology has succeeded in contributing little to this question, which consequently remains an attractive research objective. As sketched in Chapter 6, the Moray Firth in the ninth to eleventh century was a theatre of war, as hard fought and as consequential as its contemporary battleground in Wessex. The forts, ships and weapons, industries and artistry of

the battle-scarred leaders created Scotland in the Moray Firth, no less than Alfred created England in Wessex. They await and deserve discovery.

Medieval prescriptions: sanctity and iron

A century or more elapsed after the fever of the Scots/Norse wars and before detectable investment returned to Tarbat. According to the narrative constructed here, there were at least three Middle Ages (Chapter 7). The twelfth century (our Period 4A) saw a first change in political, economic and ideological direction (Illus 8.1). The monastery was now a 300-year-old memory, marked by a filled-in ditch on the arable south field, an unrepaired road, a dysfunctional dam and a dried-up pond. Up on the hill was a run-down cemetery and chunks of carved masonry which were to be recycled in the foundations of the first medieval church (Church 2). These ruins, plus the Portmahomack place-name, with perhaps a record in some lost monastic archive, were probably sufficient to lead to the selection of the old monastic site as a place to build a new church. It seems unlikely that such a usable beach and harbour would be neglected by fishers and farmers, but we had no sighting of any other twelfth-century activity. The chapel was no doubt intended to serve a parish of Tarbat, established in keeping with the mission of David I and his mother to bring Scotland under the mantle of European orthodox Catholic Christianity.

The thirteenth century, however, saw a boom (Period 4B). Villagers arrived on the crest, with dwelling, oven and well, who were fishing on a large scale: taking deep-sea fish, inshore fish and shellfish, their remains stacked in large middens. Cultivation with broad ridge and furrow began in the south field, finally infilling the monastery ditch. The church itself was rebuilt to make the larger Church 4, with a belfry at the west end and a crypt at the east. As its east wall, the crypt may have reused the west wall of a hypothetical Pictish ruin. Inside the crypt was an aumbry, perhaps the keep-safe of church plate or those relics of St Colman of Lindisfarne later claimed to have found their home there (p 321).

Another palpable change of direction was observed in the fifteenth century (4C). The area to the west of the church (and all around it) was given over to large-scale ironworking. The church itself was renovated after a fire and a barrel vault now roofed the crypt. The nave became crowded with burials. Among these were a mighty group of confined males, one coffin famously filled with two bodies and six heads. This population was predominately from the west coast of Scotland (eight out of eleven), a stable isotope result thought to reflect the new interests held in that region by the Earls of Ross. The buried population was a 'normal' one, consisting of men, women and children and a large contingent of infants who continued to find a resting place near the crypt entrance up to the Reformation and beyond. The later Middle

Ages seem to have rung with the bells of the priests as well as the hammers of armourers. The new sanctity is evident on the peninsula dominated from the thirteenth century by the Abbey of Fearn and the very large number of chapels built at every point, including at the old Pictish ritual centres of Cadboll (St Mary's), Nigg and perhaps Shandwick (Illus 8.2). This is thought to have reflected a defiant piety in the face of the advancing Reformation (p 288).

Reformation and after

After the Reformation, our field of view narrows to the church, but this is an evolving artefact of considerable fascination, a changing installation showing how the people of Portmahomack saw themselves on earth and in the afterlife. Judging by the reworking of space and its embellishment, this was no static vision and was directly influenced by the degree of social control imposed on the congregation by minister and laird. The care and expense taken to celebrate every twist and turn of the current ideology, from the twelfth century to the nineteenth, is impressive (Chapter 7, p 289). Perhaps reflecting the ideology of our own day, the church has now become a visitor centre and a museum, a monument to the people who had lived beside the firth for fifteen centuries.

Envoi

The Portmahomack experience was one of remarkable variety, and while we cannot simply extrapolate it to all of the north-east, let alone all of north Britain, it offers an indicative biography. Like other great lives, it excels both in its individual character, its connections and what it made of them. The major peaks of what was achieved at Portmahomack, the sixth-century 'cemetery-settlement', the eighth-century monastery, the ninth-century trading farm, the twelfth-century parish church, the thirteenth-century fishing village and the fifteenth-century township, represent changes in direction at unequal intervals. While some of these developments may be due to climatic lows or some other natural *force majeure*, switches in farming strategy between grain and cattle, in social relations between family and single-sex communities, in industry between the making of giant stone monuments and the making of belts and weapons, in motivation between faith in prayer and reliance on profit, all seem to spring from ideological conviction. By and large, the resources were stable. It is new ideas, especially those relating to the theoretical benefits of religion, that apparently drive our community one way and then another over the thousand years experienced here. This is the rationale behind the 'changing ideologies' of our title. In the process, this now remote and beautiful place on the north-eastern edge of the British island has shown itself to have been perennially inventive, adaptive, multicultural and ingenious, a touchstone of European thinking.