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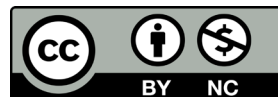
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**Digest 8 MONUMENTS AND PLACENAMES ON THE TARBAT PENINSULA**

**Legend**

- % possible Pictish, pre-ninth-century existence [6]
- + Norse, ninth–eleventh century [6]
- \* Gaelic, probably medieval, eleventh–sixteenth century [36]

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.
- + Arbol: Norse *ork-bol*; ‘farm of the ark? Seal?’. Nearby is *Lòn tigh nan cat* ‘Cats’ house meadow’.
- \* Balachladich: ‘village on the shore’.
- \* Balaldie: ‘village of the stream’.
- \* Balintore: was G. *Bail’ an toghair* [‘village of bleaching’ – ie flax]. It was also Abbot’s Port, Abbot’s haven.
- \* Balloan Castle: ‘Town of the meadow’. Two causeways led to it. *Cabh-sair an righ* ‘King’s causeway’. *An cabhsar mor* ‘big causeway’. Late sixteenth-century tower house. (RCAHMS no 250; MacGibbon & Ross 1887–92, ii: 248–51)
- Balone Mill: Stone and brick-built mill and mill pond visible in 1977 (RCAHMS no 332; NH 930 839).
- \* 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).
- \* Balnuig: G. *bail’ an aoig* ‘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’ bhealaidh* [not glossed]. Between this and Balintore was the ‘pass of the cattle’.
- % \* + Cadboll (Cathabul 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 Caisteal 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 Sgàth fort of dread (Eng. Dunskaith). 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 of a fort. The fort had a rampart and three ditches with a D-shaped enclosure within. Numerous shell middens were reported in 1872 (FSA, 643; RCAHMS no 180, NH 929 872; no 342, NH 931 893).

Chapel Hill: (see chapels, below).

\* Cillean Helpak: a fishing bank in the Moray Firth.

\* Cnoc Tigh: the remains of what may have been a broch stand on a tongue of raised beach 650m SW of Lower Seafields. It measures 22m in diameter over a wall 5.5m thick (RCAHMS no 184, NH 902 832; Macfarlane 1906–8, i, 215).

\* Culinald: ‘Burn-nook’ now part of Nigg Farm. The stream flows through the gully at Nigg Church.

\* Culliss: G. *Cùl an lios* (‘behind a fort with earthen bank [a lios]’).

\* Dallachie: G. *loch an dàilich* ‘loch of the meetings (?)’.

Dunskeath Castle: see Castlecraig.

\* Fearn: from Lat. *Nova Farina* (New Flour). Parish is G. *Sgìr na Manachainn* (Parish of the monastery) (Watson 1904, 40). Said to be

‘several druidical temples in this parish’ (FSA, 387).

\* Gallow Hill: G. *cnoc na croiche*. About a mile from Ballone Castle.

\* + Geanies: G. *Gàan* probably from Norse *gja* a chasm, from the rocky coast. Traditional site of Geanies Castle is at NH 894 798 (RCAHMS no 257).

\* Hilton [Eng]: was G. *Bail’ a’ chnuic* [settlement on the hill]. Chapel dedicated to St Mary. Thus *Craeg na baintighearna* (Lady’s Rock); see cemeteries and ports.

Milton. Milntown Castle, built in c 1500, No visible remains in 1977 (RCAHMS no 261, NH 772 737)

Milton: Crop mark of an oval enclosure c 18m in diameter noted 400m south-east of Tarbat House (RCAHMS no 202, NH 773 733).

Milton, Polnicol: G. *Poll Neacail* ‘Nicol’s pool’. Crop marks of six ring ditches c 5m in diameter recorded about 100m north-west of Polnicol (RCAHMS no 199, NH 752 731).

Milton, Rhives: Cropmarks about 400m north-west of Rhives show parts of three sides 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(a)istidh* ‘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 gully on which the church stands. ‘on the analogy of other parish names it is perhaps safer to regard this gully 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. *Bail’ a’ choillean*, ‘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’.

\* Poulfock: 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

## PORTMAHOMACK ON TARBAT NESS

would say: *‘tiugamaid ‘bhàn ‘dheanamh rotha riachagan’* ‘let us go down to make rows of scratches’ (to sow seed in)’ (Watson 1904, 51). This implies an association between the duns and ards 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 182; 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 264, NH 892 825).

\* Rockfield: was *G a’ Chreag* (‘rocks’).

\* Rhyinie: *G ràthan*. ‘Little fort’.

\* Tarrel: *G Tarail* ‘over rock’. A dun survives as an enclosure *c* 9.5 × 6.7m on the summit of a rocky knoll overlooking the seashore. An entrance is visible on the east side (RCAHMS no 189; NH 904 803). Shell middens exposed in 1977 (RCAHMS no 348, NH 904 804). Remains of a mill visible in 1977 (RCAHMS no 335, NH 900 799).

+ Shandwick: Norse *sand-vik*, ‘sandy bay’.

\* Skinnertown *G. baile nan Scinnearach*. Skinner was a very common surname in the coastal villages of Easter Ross (Watson 1904, 48).

\* Tarbat: *G. tairbeart* (for *tairm-bert*, ‘an over-bringing’). Portage, also isthmus (Watson 1986, 505).

\* Teampall Earach: site of a cave on the south coast, east of Bindal, opposite a moor (now cultivated) between Bindal and Wilkhaven called *Blàr-Earach*. There is a tradition that the cave was once used for purposes of worship. See Chapels.

\* Toll Raoiridh: cave on north-east side of the Ness.

### **Names of paths leading to the shore beneath the rocks (at Shandwick)**

*Cadha nan caorach* ‘sheep’s path’.

*Cadha sgriodaidh* ‘shingly path’.

*Cadha nan suibhean* ‘raspberry path’.

*Cadh a’ bhodaich* ‘the old man’s path’.

*Cadha a’ bhreacaich* ‘speckled place path’.

*Cadha Neachdain* ‘Nectans’ path’.

*Cadha ‘n ruigh* ‘sloping path’.

*Cadha togail toinn* ‘the path where you need a push from behind’.

*Cadha port an druidh* ‘path of the druid’s port’ (west of Shandwick).

### **Portage**

\* TARBAT: (*Arterbert* in 1227) is probably from Gaelic *Tairbeart* meaning an isthmus or peninsula, but may be from an older P-Celtic (British) word meaning headland.

\* Dallachie: *G loch an dàilich* ? ‘Loch of the meetings’.

\* Loch Clais na cré: Loch of the clay hollow.

\* Lochslin: *G.* from *slinn*, a weaver’s sley. ‘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.)

\* Locheye: *G loch na h-iudhe. Uidh* from Norse *eith*, isthmus. Might refer to slow running water between lochs.

\* Mounteagle: *G cnoc na h-iolaire*. Also *an eith*. [So also perhaps slow running water.]

### **Battlefield**

\* Blàr ‘a chath: The battlefield. Adjacent to Port Mòr (great port) at NH 925 870.

### **Ports and havens**

\* PORTMAHOMACK: is from the Gaelic meaning the Port of Colm, Colman or Cholmag.

\* Port a’ chait: ‘Cat’s port’, cf Cadboll NH 947 876. Cairns near the lighthouse are named Bodach an rudha, (the old man of the point), an Cailleach (the old wife), a’ Bhean-mhuinntir (the servant lass).

\* Wilkhaven: translates from *Port nam faochag* [= wilk; = ?whelk]. It was Allan-sallach [ford] and had a chapel dedicated to St Bride.

\* Port a’ Chaisteil: Castlehaven (qv). Also called Port Buckie on OS map.

\* Balintore: was also Abbot’s Port, Abbot’s haven.

\* Port na baintighearna: Lady’s haven (Hilton of Cadboll beach). Medieval: Cadboll Fisher.

\* Port an Druidh: (Druid’s port) is west of Shandwick. Shandwick had a Ballnamorich Fisher town in 1786.

\* Port Mòr: (great port) at NH 925 870.

\* Port Uilleim: ‘William’s port’. NH 921 859.

### **Wells G Tobar**

\* Tobar ma Chalmag: ‘Colman’s well’ is ‘behind the library’ in Portmahomack.

\* Tobar na baintighearna: ‘Lady’s haven well’ at Hilton beach.

\* Tobar na slainte: ‘healthy well’ at Shandwick.

\* Tobar Cormaig: ‘Cormac’s well’ (at Shandwick farmhouse).

Nigg had twenty wells, including a Tobar a’ bhaistidh baptismal well (just above the old UP church).

### *Twenty chapels recorded on the Tarbat peninsula*

1. Portmahomack, St Colman’s Church (extant) (RCAHMS no 241, 242; NH 914 840; see Chapter 2, p 15).
2. Portmahomack, Chapel Hill (placename extant). ‘The discovery before 1845 of human bones “deposited within rough flags of freestone” may be linked with the chapel that is alleged to have stood on this site. The rough flooring of flat stones in a roughly oblong setting, approximately east and west’ recorded in 1947 may be associated with the chapel or with later buildings, which were still standing on the site in 1907 (RCAHMS no 235, NH 916 845).
3. Portmahomack, Dunbar Chapel, still visible in 1791 (FSA, 648).
4. Portmahomack, Teampall Earach, *Easter Temple*, near the old castle of Tarbat (Balone). ‘Near it is a plentiful spring of water which continues to bear the name of Tobair Mhuir or Mary’s Well. A small cave or grotto is shown as the abode of the priest’ (FSA, 648). A single gravestone dated 1682 was all that remained in 1977 (RCAHMS no 245, NH 926 834).
5. Portmahomack *St Brigit’s Chapel* site recorded at *Allansallach* ‘A short mile’ east of Portmahomack church by Macfarlane (1906–8, I, 215). Presumably near Wilkhaven (Watson 1904, 45).
6. Portmahomack St John’s Chapel. Stood a ‘large mile’ from Tarbat parish church (Macfarlane 1906–8, I, 215; RCAHMS, no 244).
7. Bindal Hermitage. The site of an old hermitage situated on the shore of the Moray Firth *c* 1.5 miles north-east of Bindal. A wall *c* 7 ft high and 4 ft broad is supposed to have provided the east, north and south sides, while the W side was the cliff (ONB 1872). RCAHMS describes the boundary wall as drystone built and averaging 1.3m wide and 1.7m high with

## DIGEST OF EVIDENCE

- 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-steading'. Nearby is *Stiana Bleadar* (Norse = Stone spot).
8. Balnabruach: a chapel recorded by Davidson (1946, 27; RCAHMS no 206, NH C 908 840).
  9. Wester Arboll: a chapel. 'John Baptist's Chappel' (Macfarlane 1906–8, I, 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 *Annaid* 'The Annat', which refers to a chapel with relics of the founder (Watson 1904, 52–3). Castle built by William the Lion at Dunskeath 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 undressed 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; Alston 1999, 181).
  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 1977 (RCAHMS no 229, NH 837 772).
  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].

Balnabruaich. 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 1865, 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 caves, 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 was 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 (SSA, 30).

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 chlaidh" 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 ruinous by 1780 and removed in 1942 (RCAHMS no 263, NH 858 745).

### References

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

References to Watson are to his 1904 *Placenames of Ross and Cromarty* [repr. Evanton 1996] unless otherwise indicated.

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RCAHMS 1979 *The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. The archaeological sites and monuments of Easter Ross, Ross and Cromarty District, Highland Region, The archaeological sites and monuments of Scotland series no 6*. Edinburgh.