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A Fragmented Masterpiece

Recovering the Biography of the Hilton of Cadboll Pictish Cross-Slab

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Appendix 1

Hilton of Cadboll: assessment and project design 1998

MARTIN CARVER

Produced for the University of York 1998 (reproduced here without the illustrations and annexes)

Introduction

This paper concerns the proposed archaeological investigation of the site of a ruined chapel at Hilton of Cadboll (Plate I, Fig 1) where it is proposed to erect a replica of the famous Hilton of Cadboll stone (Plate II).

The evaluation to date suggests that a full investigation of the site and the surrounding area would be desirable, to understand the nature of occupation in the ninth century, the period in which the stone was probably made and first erected.

Presented here is a preliminary assessment of the site and a suggested programme of action. It is offered as a basis for discussion between interested parties.

Objectives:

* To erect a replica of the Hilton of Cadboll stone at Hilton
* To develop the site so that it can be visited by the public
* To evaluate the site prior to any development
* To investigate the site in the context of a major programme of research into early historic Easter Ross, currently under way.

Participants:

* Highland Council are sponsors and will need to be approached for planning permission to erect the stone (Jim Patterson).
* Historic Scotland have given Scheduled Monument Consent for a geophysical survey, and will need to be approached in the event of any more work on the chapel site (Nick Bridgland).
* The Royal Commission of Ancient and Historical Monuments have contributed a topographical survey (Graham Ritchie).
* The Cadboll Estate have given permission for work to be undertaken and are sponsors (Andrew Taylor).
* The Tain and Easter Ross Civic Trust is currently acting as grant-holder and co-ordinator (Richard Easson).
* The University of York has carried out the evaluation and is carrying out the programme of archaeological research in the area (Martin Carver).
* Documentary research on the seaboard villages, including Hilton of Cadboll, sponsored by Historic Scotland and carried out by North Highland Archaeology in 1996, has been contributed to the evaluation (Graham Robbins).

Programmes to date

1. The making of the replica

An estimate for the making of a replica stone was received from Barry Grove in July 1997 and sent to Tain and Easter Ross Civic Trust, by whom a commission would be issued. The original stone, in the National Museums of Scotland, is currently off display and will probably remain accessible for a few weeks. There is thus temporarily an opportunity for the carver to gain access to the stone and take measurements etc from it. It would seem desirable to issue Barry Grove with a commission as soon as possible (Annex A).

2. Surveys of the site

2.1 A topographical survey of the site by RCAHMS was undertaken in 1997 (Annex B).

2.2 A package of topographical and geophysical surveys of the site were undertaken by the University of York in 1997 (Annex C).

2.3 A Catalogue of References to Human Burials at Shandwick, Balintore and Hilton was compiled by Graham Robbins. The relevant findings are given in Annex D.

2.4 A review of the documentary and toponymic evidence for the origins of Shandwick,

Balintore and Hilton was undertaken by Graham Robbins. The relevant findings are summarised in Annex E.

2.5 A dowsing operation was undertaken in 1996 by D L Bates (Annex F).

3. Evaluation (Figs 2, 3)

3.1 Evidence for the antiquity of the chapel site

The site in question is located at NH 883 791 (RCAHMS 1979, no 210) and is referred to in what follows as 'The Seashore chapel site', to avoid confusion with the sites of other documented chapels and place-names, which may or may not refer to the site under investigation.

The provenance of the stone

The earliest evidence attributed to the seashore chapel site is the Pictish 'Hilton of Cadboll' stone, now in NMS, which is dated on stylistic grounds to about AD 800. The stone has had a turbulent history since it was erected, at an unknown location, as a high status monument of unknown purpose, in the ninth century. It had been taken down before 1676, since its front side which may have once carried a cross, now carries an inscription of that date commemorating Alexander Duff and his three wives. Before 1780, the stone was said to have stood near the ruins of a chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary, 'under the brow of the hill on which the farmhouse of Cadboll is situated' (Cordiner 1780, 65). By 1811, it was lying near the seashore face down when Cordiner is said to have discovered that there was carving on the underside and had the stone turned over (Allen & Anderson 1903, 61). By 1856 it was lying 'in a shed, the wall of which was believed to have formed part of an ancient chapel' (Stuart 1856 I, 10). By 1903, the stone had been removed to Invergordon Castle, where it stood on a modern base in the grounds at the side of the carriage drive half a mile south of the castle (Allen & Anderson 1903, 61). When Invergordon Castle was demolished in 1928 it was sent to the British Museum, but following protests was transferred to the National Museums of Scotland where it remains (Gordon & Macdonald *c* 1988, 15).

There are inconsistencies here which make it difficult to relate with confidence the association of the Hilton of Cadboll stone and the seashore chapel site. Alexander Duff was buried at Fearn, and in explanation of the separation of the man and his memorial, Allen and Anderson suggest (1903, 62n) that, while the stone was made at Hilton, it proved 'too heavy' to carry to Fearn. The stone was however moved without machinery at least twice (in 1676 and after 1811) so it could theoretically have been taken to Fearn; or indeed it could have originated and been reworked at Fearn, used as Duff's grave cover as intended and subsequently been taken to Cadboll. Since the official burial ground of Hilton of Cadboll before 1628 was at St Colman's Tarbat, 6.5 miles away (Robbins, annex E), it is also not impossible that the stone originated, and was reworked, at Portmahomack. There are other reasons for supposing that it might have begun its history in the vicinity of Cadboll Castle (see below).

Cordiner seems to have lived from about 1746 to 1794 (Henderson in the Introduction to Allen & Anderson 1993 edn, 13), so he could not have turned over the stone in 1811. He could have seen the stone in its 'original' position near a chapel dedicated to Mary, before 1794. But this position was not original in any other sense, since the stone had already been reworked in 1676 to carry the inscription to Alexander Duff. Assuming that Cadboll Farm is co-located with Cadboll Castle, the stone was then located 'under the brow of the hill' on which it stands. This is an odd way to describe the site of the seashore chapel, but the dedication suggests that the location is correct. It is this site that Watson (1904, 43–4) accepts as that of 'Our Ladyis Chapell' in 1610; and he records local names associated with this dedication that still survived: Creag na bantighearna (Lady's Rock) Tobar na baintighearna (Lady's Well), Port na baintighearna (Lady's haven), and Bard Mhoire, Mary's meadow or enclosure. Lady Street, leading to the chapel site, also survives today. This seems to constitute the best evidence that the Cadboll stone, wherever it originated, was actually found at the seashore chapel site and had been there since at least 1780.

Survey in 1978 noticed a semi-circular annexe at the west end of the seashore chapel site, which it was assumed was the 'original' site of the stone (RCAHMS 1979, no 224). But this is 'at' rather than 'near' the chapel. Unless the Duff inscription was carved in situ, it can only have been erected there in any case after 1676 and had been dismounted by 1811.

The early settlements at Cadboll

The seashore site cannot have been the original site of Hilton (Hilltown) of Cadboll (Robbins, annex E, 3). By 1478, the names Catboll-fisher, Cadboll-abbot

and Wester Cadboll apparently refer to present Hilton, Balintore and a settlement to the west (ibid, citing OPS, 442–3). In 1561–6 the seashore site was known as the Fishertown of Hilton, and furnished fish to Fearn Abbey, suggesting that the foreshore was specially developed as a fishing village. By 1610 it was known as Bail' a' chnuic, 'cliff town' (Gordon & Macdonald *c*1988, 18). The Cadboll Estate Maps of 1813 show a 'Hilltown' located 'behind the eroded cliffline at the back of the raised beach' with 'Fishertown of Hilltown' on the present site of Shore Street (Robbins, annex E, 3).

It thus seems likely that there was once a settlement above the cliffs called Cadboll, which subsequently spawned two others, Hilltown and Fishertown. This first site may have been the Wester Cadboll of 1478, although Robbins points out that in common usage, Shandwick is said to lie to the 'west' (actually south west) of Balintore. The Wester Cadboll of 1478 could therefore be intended for Shandwick.

The name Cadboll is from the Norse and refers to a farmstead (Watson 1903, 40). Its most likely location is the site of the castle, currently the headquarters of the Cadboll estate. The extant remains of a two or three storied tower-house stand at the spot and date to the 16th century. A 17th-century laird's house stands adjacent (RCAHMS 1979, no 252; NH 878 776). Some 650m WNW of Cadboll Castle a cropmark has been recorded representing three sides of a rectangular enclosure measuring at least 40×30m (RCAHMS 1979, no 194; NH 871 778).

There are therefore five candidates for the place of origin of the Hilton of Cadboll stone: Fearn, Portmahomack, Cadboll, 'Hilltown' of Cadboll and the present Hilton, the chapel site, otherwise Fishertown of Cadboll or Clifftown. The Abbey of Fearn was founded at its present site in *c*1238, and not known to have been the site of an earlier settlement. Portmahomack, the nearest known Pictish site, was the site of the mother church and official burial ground in the middle ages, and there are clear and intimate artistic connections between the Tarbat and Hilton stones (eg with TR 1, Allen & Anderson 1903, 74). A great many stones were broken up here at the reformation, and it is not inconceivable that one of them should have gone into circulation as a grave cover. However, no antiquarian association of the Hilton stone and Tarbat Old Church has been recorded.

In the Cadboll area, a presumed mother-settlement at Cadboll itself seems the most eligible for a ninth-century date. The name is Norse, and should date from the Norse interest in Easter Ross between the ninth-11th century. A Norse place-name does not disqualify it as the place of manufacture of the Hilton stone. The Fishertown of Cadboll was in existence by 1478 (as Catboll-Fisher), and a Hilltown of Cadboll by 1813. This latter had presumably merged with the seashore settlement, taking the name with it, by 1840, when the population was enlarged by people cleared from Sutherland and new houses were built (Gordon & Macdonald 1988, 88). If the stone originated at Cadboll, it could have stood in profile above the cliffs looking out to sea as at Shandwick (equally a Norse place-name). At a given moment, in about 1676, it would have been taken down and reworked as a grave cover and transported to Fearn. Subsequently (before 1780), it would have been reclaimed and transported back to Cadboll, where a new site was eventually found for it in 'Fishertown'.

It is therefore possible to construct a hypothesis in which the Hilton of Cadboll stone originally stood at Cadboll on the high ground above the cliffs within a settlement founded in the ninth century or earlier. But this is by no means proven and would not in any case disqualify the chapel site from hosting a replica, since it was once certainly there, however briefly. A chapel dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary was very probably a feature of this site from at least the later Middle Ages, when it could have served the population of Catboll-Fisher, who no doubt operated their boats off the small beach immediately adjacent, on behalf of the Abbey of Fearn.

Whether this sea-shore site had a greater antiquity than Fearn Abbey itself, and what kind of settlement it may have been, is completely unknown. On the analogy of the site being unearthed at Portmahomack, the D-shaped protected beach at Hilton would suit both Pictish and Viking exploitation. It would be most interesting to know, with greater confidence than we do now, in what context the Hilton of Cadboll stone, one of the most majestic of the entire Pictish corpus, may have had its origin and function. This may be elucidated by means of an archaeological investigation, now in its preliminary phase.

3.2 Results of surveys: seashore chapel site (Annex A and B)

The area of the seashore chapel site is less than 12.5 acres (5 hectares) defined to the north-west by an arc of cliffs, to the south-east by the sea and to north-

east and south-west by a narrowing of the littoral strip between the cliffs and the sea. A short stretch of beach interrupts the rocky foreshore opposite the chapel site. The site has a sandy subsoil, but there are patches of clay deposit (now boggy) towards the sea.

The features mapped by the surveys are shown in Fig 3.

1 A recent quarry for sand. Some stratification was exposed in the face of the quarry, without any indications of earlier settlement.
2 An L-shaped bank of stones covered with turf seems to close the north end of the site. It had been cut through by an existing track (3).
3 Track still in periodic use.
4 Possible earlier track [F2]
5 Possible earlier track [F3]
6 The chapel – a rectangular building aligned E–W. It appears to have had a pit dug in its centre. [S1]
7 One or more arcs of walling around the chapel on its west side. This may be the 'semi-circular annexe' observed in 1978 (RCAHMCS 1979) [F5]
8 One or more enclosures around the chapel. These are aligned SW–NE. [F6]
9 Occupation debris west [F1; Fig 11, Annex C]
10 Occupation debris east [F2] of the chapel. These are positioned like spoil heaps, as though some clearance of the chapel site had taken place; an impression reinforced by the detection of a back-filled hole at the centre of the chapel [F4]
11 A building [S2] aligned W–E like the chapel.
12 Four patches of possible occupation debris associated with the building S2 [F7–10].

3.3 Chance finds and observations

1 Watson (1903, 44) recorded that there was a burial ground for unbaptised children near the Lady's Well. Local tradition also suggests that this area (near the chapel) was used for cholera burials in 1832 (Robbins, annex D, 11)
2 Human bones have been recovered (1995) from rabbit holes at the eastern end of the outer enclosure, and are now in Inverness Museum (Robbins annex D, 10)
3 A dowsing project was carried out by D L Bates in December 1996 at the invitation of Jane Durham (Bates annex F). Direct dowsing on the stone itself gave a date of AD 736. The position of the stone before its removal to Invergordon is suggested as at the west end of the chapel. A rectangular plinth was said to have been detected at this location, in which the stone would have stood facing west. The missing portion of the stone was said to remain in position in this plinth. The mound west of the chapel was interpreted as the grave of a prominent person dated by dowsing to AD 724. Dowsing dated the walls of the enclosure to AD 736 and the chapel itself to AD 844.

3.4 Interpretation

It seems likely that the earthworks and anomalies so far located on the site belong to the deserted medieval village of Catboll-Fisher. S1 is probably the chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and S2 one of a number of other houses on the same E–W alignment, which no doubt clustered around the chapel.

The medieval settlement is unlikely to have had a burial ground of its own, except, perhaps, an area for the burial of unbaptised infants. The burial ground at Catboll-Fisher is signified by the enclosures around the chapel, and was probably added after the reformation in the 16th century, or after its removal from the parish of Tarbat to that of Fearn in 1628. The enclosures were erected on a NE–SW alignment (ie parallel with the foreshore). The appellation 'Clifftown' suggests that the settlement was still operating in 1610.

The chapel was in ruins by 1780, so the adjacent settlement had by that time probably been abandoned for one lying farther south, designated as Fishertown by 1813. The abandoned site may have been used to bury cholera victims in 1832.

The Hilton of Cadboll stone had reached the chapel site by 1780, and perhaps stood within the arc of walling on the west side of the chapel. These in turn may have formed the foundations of a lean-to shed – that seen by Stuart in or before 1856. Before that it had served as a grave cover dated 1676, intended for a burial at Fearn. It may have originated at Fearn or at the Pictish centre at Portmahomack, but the fact that it ended up at one of the Cadboll sites is *prima facie* evidence that it began there. Its original site would have been a ninth-century settlement or cemetery. This may have been located either on the high ground at Cadboll or beneath the chapel site at Hilton, where the medieval fishing village was to develop.

4. Future programme of action

4.1 Erection of the replica and development of the site

If, as is hoped, the decision is made to commission a replica of the Hilton of Cadboll stone, erect it on the chapel site and provide access to visitors, a programme of archaeological site management will be required, whether or not it is combined with a programme of archaeological research (see below).

The three obvious components of a basic display policy are (1) the erected replica, (2) a car-park and (3) an access path to connect the two.

We have no certain information as to where the stone originally stood, and can only guess where it stood after 1676. Dowsing apart, there is no direct evidence that it ever stood on a plinth at the west end of the chapel at Hilton, or that there is any more of it to be found there. But the west end of the chapel would be an obvious place to have re-erected the stone in the post-medieval period, and the semi-circular enclosure there is an obvious target for investigation.

From the point of view of any 'original' site, the stone could be erected anywhere that was convenient, provided that the impact is first assessed. The layout of a display could therefore be led by planning considerations. From the archaeological viewpoint, the appropriate positioning of the stone and car-park would depend principally on whether there is to be a research programme, and whether archaeological work on the site would precede or follow the erection of the stone. If it is to be erected prior to archaeological investigation, then it would be advisable to erect it near the point of entry and away from the earthworks. If it is to be erected after archaeological investigation, then the location of the stone and car-park can be guided by the results of that investigation. In particular, excavation of the chapel site would reveal a position for the replica that was appropriate and had no deleterious impact.

4.2 Archaeological research programme

Hilton of Cadboll is an attractive subject for archaeological research, with a high potential to contribute to current work.

CONTEXT

Over the past two decades a small group of archaeologists and historians has been engaged in trying to discover the origins of the countries of Europe, particularly those which border the North Sea. A number of different social formations has been defined before and after the seventh century, the period in which most of the changes took place. Tribal kin-based groups give way to land partition in small lordships, which in turn coelesce into kingdoms in which a territory supports a single overall leader through taxation. A people also professes an ideology, which may be pagan or Christian and can exhibit variety within those broad headings. A Christian community can, for example, profess a monastic or an episcopal organisation. It appears that these options are preferred to a different degree in different territories. Territories adopting a similar position are aligned, while differences in alignment, particularly in neighbours, provide a persistent cause of conflict.

These social formations and ideological alignments can be detected by archaeology, because the material culture they generate is different. For example, a folk inhabits a network of small family sized villages, while a system of small lordships has estate centres, like manors. Christian and pagan can be distinguished, but within Christianity, the monastic can be distinguished from the episcopal. Using this kind of detection, a history of this undocumented period is beginning to be written.

The Sutton Hoo project showed that a tribal people went over to a system of lordships in the later sixth century, and in the early seventh formed a kingdom (of East Anglia) but did so in the Pagan idiom aligned with Scandinavia, to counter the threat from Christian Kent and France (Carver 1998). Within 50 years the conflict had been resolved in favour of a Christian East Anglia, but the Scandinavian alliance was reheated momentarily in the Viking era.

In Yorkshire it can be shown that the Christian kingdom of Northumbria, formed in a monastic and then an episcopal organisation, was changed by the Vikings to a 'secular' Christian kingdom, in which lordships appointed their own priests. This important result was deduced entirely from the type and distribution of sculpture, which is found clustered in monastic sites in the seventh-eighth century and is distributed in numerous estates in the ninth (Carver, forthcoming).

The *Tarbat Discovery Programme* set out to examine the early history of the peoples of the Dornoch Firth area in the same way. The types and distribution of settlements, burials and sculpture would be studied to reveal the social and religious transformations of this part of the North Sea region. The site at Portmahomack seemingly occupied from the second

century to the 11th, should provide a control on the process to be observed more generally. The expectation is that it will reveal a sequence of Pagan Pictish lordship, a monastic centre, and a Viking beachmarket, over 800 years, with influence at different times from Irish, English and Scandinavian neighbours (Carver 1995).

The model at present does not favour the formation of any Pictish kingdom. The sculpture, like that of Yorkshire, shows that while there may have been some (rare) monastic centres, such as Rosemarkie and Portmahomack, the principal investments are distributed in many estates, such as Nigg, Shandwick, Edderton – and Cadboll. The lordship model is one that suits the area, at least in the ninth century, and may explain why the Pictish language and art was so easily extinguished in favour of the new (Irish) kingdom of Scotland or in favour of alliance with the Scandinavian cause. The Dornoch Firth, on the border between these two power blocs may be a good place to study their interactions (Carver 1996).

Portmahomack, Cadboll, Nigg, Shandwick, and Rosemarkie are thus players in the same drama. It should be possible one day to write the history of the formative but largely undocumented period fourth-10th century, but badly needed first is some tangible evidence for settlement. The sculpture is expressive, of belief and alignment, but it is all much the same date (late eighth/early ninth century); we have no context for it and little idea of what came before and after its so-called 'Golden Age'. The settlement at Portmahomack will go some way to solving the problem, but the project has a major weakness in that the churchyard cannot be excavated, and this is likely to deny a sight of some of the key structures, particularly the ecclesiastical ones. It is also quite probable that Portmahomack had a special ecclesiastical role on Tarbat Ness. We therefore need a 'lordship' to compare it with.

All these reasons mean that the investigation of Cadboll would be highly relevant to the current research programme. As can be seen from the discussion above, the original site of the Cadboll stone is by no means certain, but its context, if it can be discovered is extremely significant. Was such a stone produced for a local potentate, as opposed to a Royal patron or a monastic atelier? Was this potentate a Pictish lord – or lady – or a Picto-Norse estate owner based on a new foundation? With Portmahomack and Shandwick contemporary and adjacent the local estate at Cadboll can scarcely have been extensive. This opens a vision of the peoples of ninth century north-east Scotland that resembles Gotland more than its immediate neighbours in Dal Riada, southern Pictland or Northumbria.

Targets (Fig 4)

An archaeological investigation of the Cadboll area would give primacy to the seashore chapel site, but it would need to include intensive survey in a number of other zones, suggested by the documentary research (above) and by topography: the area of Cadboll Castle, possible site of a ninth-century settlement; the area around Drumossie; the area around Hilton of Cadboll house, possible site of the original Hilltown; the area between the Chapel site ('Catboll-Fisher') and the well, probably Mary's Meadow (Fig 4).

Programme for the chapel site

Strip and map the area of the chapel [S1], the enclosure on the west side and the anomalies to the east [S2]. This should show:

* Whether medieval buildings other than the church had survived.
* The potential for making a monument of the medieval village.
* The nature of the enclosure at the west end and whether any of the stone remains from the post-medieval arrangements of display.
* (By limited intervention) Whether the medieval village overlies another more ancient settlement.
* (If required) A suitable place to erect the replica of the Cadboll stone.

Programme for survey

Non-invasive surveys (mainly geophysical) would be applied to the areas shown in Fig 4.

Following this, test transects would be excavated across any promising anomalies, to confirm that a settlement has been found, and if possible to date it.

This evaluation work might well lead to the identity of an important early settlement, which would merit detailed investigation. (This would be undertaken in close collaboration with landowners and farmers.)

Mode of operation

All the proposed fieldwork is staged, that is, each stage of the investigation is completed before the next one

starts, and it would only start with the full backing of the participants and when adequate funding was in place.

The participants may well wish to manage the project as a company or committee, on which the interests of residents, landowners and scholars were represented. The University of York team is quite happy to operate in this way. Or, if preferred the University team can operate quite independently, and carry the sole responsibility for seeking funds and permission.

Rewards

* The rewards for knowledge are potentially very great. They will throw new light on the history of Scotland that is multi-cultural and European in its scope.
* The Chapel site, it could be argued, deserves to be evaluated, studied, conserved and presented in its own right
* The residents of Cadboll may wish to attract summer pilgrims to their village. The effect of having a replica would be greatly enhanced by archaeological research, development (eg a car-park) and by the presentation of the chapel site.
* An attraction at Cadboll, combined with an attraction at Portmahomack would increase the tourist circulation around the Tarbat peninsula. Having two attractions would greatly increase the chances of each succeeding.
* The investigation of the Castle and other adjacent sites would be mainly to understand the context of the Cadboll stone. There would be no obvious pressure to make a conserved or displayed monument on farmland.

5. Conclusion

This paper offers a summary of current understanding of the Cadboll site and the degree to which it may have provided a context for the celebrated Hilton of Cadboll stone.

It concludes that the stone could be replicated and erected in any position at Hilton of Cadboll, but the erection of the stone and the provision for visitors may require some archaeological mitigation.

There are other reasons, connected to both research and tourism, which would make the excavation of the Chapel site and its presentation to the public desirable.

Research suggests that an archaeological investigation of neighbouring areas could also prove very rewarding for the understanding of the original context of the Hilton of Cadboll stone, and through that to a new vision of the early history of north-east Scotland.

7. Agenda

(1) This paper is being circulated at the end of May 1998. Comments on its content, including the accuracy and reading of the documentation, and on the proposals being made would be welcome by, say, end of June. I would also be glad to be made aware of any other addressees to whom the document should sent.

(2) I would like to propose a meeting of addressees at Cadboll during August 1998, from which a plan of campaign might emerge.

(3) I would be glad of confirmation that, whatever the archaeological programme may be, the replica is to be commissioned.

MARTIN CARVER
23 May 1998

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List of illustrations

List of annexes