

'A Religious Centre of Some Importance'

Investigations at the Early Christian Site at Ballachly, Dunbeath, Caithness

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A monastery at Ballachly is not known from documentary sources, and even the dedication is lost, the centre of the site being known locally as Chapel Hill and the House of Peace. Here on a prominent hillock stands an enclosed plateau, with a church and putative cell or possible founder's tomb. From the slope of the hill radiate out massive walls, and there are further walls defining a series of outer enclosures, extending to an area of c.4 ha.



Early Wall in Trench IV

Excavation established a sequence of activity on the site which was quite unexpected. Of the Early Christian monastery no direct evidence was uncovered. However, in Trench IV, a wall was discovered dated by pottery to the 6th or 7th centuries. The characteristics of the construction techniques employed in this wall make it highly likely that it belonged to an Early Christian site rather than a Pictish secular site. The ditch in Trench VI appears to pre-date the late Norse period and may be of the same period as the wall. Its function is unknown but it may well be a good candidate for a monastic vallum.



Ditch Revealed in Trench VI



6th - 7th Century Pottery Discovered in Trench IV



Late Norse Pottery



Norse Period Iron Object in-situ

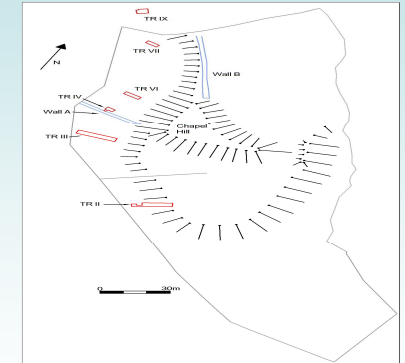


Kiln Furniture

Activity continued well into the Norse period. Trench IV provided the best evidence for Norse activity through the discovery of a post-hole associated with features of a craft-working nature. This activity consisted of iron-working as well as some hints of non-ferrous metal-working. Norse pottery has been discovered across the whole site associated with widespread layers containing much evidence for industrial activity.



Incised Cross Slab – probably dating to the 7th Century



It was also established that the large radial Wall A was constructed in the Norse period. At first sight it would seem that Wall B is also of Norse date but a closer examination of the construction techniques hints at an earlier prehistoric origin for this feature.



Wall B – Evidence for Prehistoric Occupation?



Wall A – Norse Foundation

The nature of the Norse period occupation remains enigmatic. The 10th century occupation is still likely to have been largely associated with Christian activity – interlace fragments of a cross found in the croft wall have been dated to the 10th century. However, as the centuries passed, the commercial aspects may have outweighed religious devotion, and by the 15th century the site seems to have been active largely in iron production.



Interlace Cross Slab of the 10th Century

Commercial aspects may be demonstrated through the archaeology. German stoneware has been identified dating to the 14th or 15th centuries pointing at continental links, and it is known from a will of the 15th century that the area was well known for its iron. Excavation of a cobbled area dating to the 15th to 16th centuries may well have been connected with such activity as much slag was found associated with it. Later, the site may have been the location of Magnusburgh, often known as Inver of Dunbeath, which was created as a burgh of barony in 1624.



Imported Stoneware



Cobbled Area in Trench III