



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

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ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID:
Designations:

PIC084
Scheduled Monument (SM13316);
Conservation Area (CA471)
Taken into State care:
1961 (Guardianship)
Last Reviewed:
2004 (2025 update to include Empire
connection)

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

KILMARTIN SCULPTURED STONES AND NEIL CAMPBELL TOMB



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Cover image: General view of the Poltalloch enclosure with Kilmartin stones at Kilmartin churchyard. © Crown Copyright HES.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The churchyard of Kilmartin contains a fine collection of early Christian, medieval and post-Reformation carved stones. Three groups of the most important carvings are held in Guardianship, although the RCAHMS survey of Kilmartin Churchyard recorded at least 113 carved stones.

The largest group comprises 23 stones and is housed within the 'lapidarium', a converted 17th-century burial aisle re-roofed by the Ministry of Works in 1957. The collection includes medieval and post-Reformation grave-slabs, effigies and part of a medieval chest-tomb.

The 'Poltalloch Enclosure' is a group of seven funerary monuments situated within the burial enclosure of the Malcolm (or MacCallum) family of Poltalloch. This collection includes a pair of medieval effigies, three medieval graveslabs and two post-Reformation monuments. Although arranged in a group, none is considered likely to be *in situ*, and all but one bear the name 'Poltalloch', suggesting they were re-used by the Malcolm family in the 18th or 19th century. This appears to be the family's attempts to permanently inscribe their post-1750 status into Kilmartin's ancient history, thus manufacturing a permanent marker of the Malcolms' improved standing which they had achieved through slavery-derived wealth.¹

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical overview

1480: According to the Black Book of Taymouth, Sir Colin Campbell of Glenorchy is buried in the 'Kirk of Kilmertyne'

c. 1627: construction of the Neil Campbell burial aisle (now the 'lapidarium').

18th/19th century: Malcolm family take legal action against another local family over possession and re-use of recumbent stones in the churchyard. Some stones moved to Poltalloch enclosure.

1927: Sir Iain Malcolm of Poltalloch invites Office of Works to consider taking churchyard monuments into Guardianship.

1957: Neil Campbell burial aisle (datestone of 1629) re-roofed to house collection of 23 carved stones.

1961: Deed of Guardianship signed for the Poltalloch enclosure.

¹ Mullen *et al* 2024, 53.

1979: fractured slab from Poltalloch enclosure taken to Stenhouse Stone Conservation Centre for repairs.

Recent research into the relationships between the Properties in Care of Scottish Ministers and the British Empire² has highlighted that Kilmartin Sculptured Stones has ‘memorialisation’ empire connection³ as the Malcolms of Poltalloch family are memorialised in various forms in Kilmartin Church (not part of the PiC) as well as in the churchyard, notably in the Poltalloch Enclosure (which forms part of the PiC). The Malcolms of Poltalloch acquired significant slavery-derived wealth during the colonial era in Jamaica. This included acting as merchants, holding shares in companies trading in the region, and owning enslaved people. Considerable monies came through compensation given when slavery was abolished in Britain. Neil Malcolm (who is commemorated in Kilmartin Church together with his grandchildren Reginald Neill and Isabella Lucy) collected almost £40,000 compensation in 1835. The family used this wealth to become major landowners in Scotland, with the acquired estates containing many sites that would become Properties in Care. The estates were cleared to create aesthetically pleasing landscapes, with funds also being directed to the excavation of some of the archaeological sites.⁴ The works to physically stamp the Malcolms’ presence at Kilmartin churchyard appears to be part of the family’s efforts to mark their raised social standing, acquired through slavery-derived wealth.⁵

Archaeological overview

Kilmartin has a long history as an ecclesiastical centre, the earliest documentary evidence being a note of the vicar’s name in 1304. The present church building is known to occupy the site of at least two predecessors, the earliest dating to 1601, which in turn may have incorporated a medieval building into its structure.

However, the presence of several early Christian monuments, as well as the sub-circular form of the churchyard, suggests a much longer history for religious activity at the site, possibly as early as the 9th or 10th century, and it is possible that this early foundation could have had connections with the early medieval power centre at Dunadd. The site is a prominent one within a landscape of prehistoric ritual monuments, and it is possible

² Full report can be downloaded from HES website: [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c. 1600-1997 \(historicenvironment.scot\)](https://www.historicenvironment.scot/research-and-archives/surveying-and-analysing-connections-between-properties-in-care-and-the-british-empire-c-1600-1997)

³ ‘Memorialisation’ connection describes a site that has statues, plaques, grave monuments, windows or other emblems of remembrance linked to individuals or institutions with links to the Empire. See Mullen *et al* 2024, 31-32 for a full definition of typology.

⁴ Mullen *et al* 2024, 50-55.

⁵ Mullen *et al* 2024, 53.

that an early church was deliberately attempting to associate itself with this special area.

The medieval funerary monuments form a remarkable collection, though without any inscriptions or dates, the social context of these monuments is lost. However, as Sir Colin Campbell of Glenorchy was buried in the churchyard in 1480, it is possible that some stones commemorate members of the Campbell family and other lesser landowners in the vicinity.

Artistic/Architectural overview

Early Christian monuments displayed at Kilmartin include a number of cross-marked slabs, each featuring the incised outline of a Latin cross, and the Kilmartin Cross, a small free-standing cross thought to date from the 9th or 10th century.

The largest group of carvings displayed at Kilmartin are West Highland graveslabs, dating from the 14th or 15th centuries. In general, these are long, tapering slabs featuring combinations of intricate scrollwork and interlace, effigies of both warriors and ecclesiastics, elaborate crosses and detailed swords with edges and borders defined by dogtooth or nail-head patterns as well as roll-moulding. These monuments are the most tangible examples of the highly distinctive West Highland style of art that flowered in late medieval Scotland. Evidence suggests this style was found in tapestry, wood carving and other art forms, although few of these have survived, apart from a few rare artefacts, such as the Queen Mary harp and the Guthrie bell-shrine.

Most of these slabs are the work of the Loch Awe 'school', a style that predominated throughout 14th and 15th century Mid Argyll, Cowal and Lorn. Although richly decorated, Loch Awe slabs are considered to be of an inferior standard and more limited in the range of designs used when compared to other schools of similar period, particularly the Iona school.

Lapidarium (stone display)

An important collection of 23 carved stones, the majority of which are West Highland graveslabs in Loch Awe style, but there are two slabs simply carved with swords, and may reflect a non-professional mason creating less-expensive memorials. Also housed here is one effigy, part of a late medieval chest-tomb, and two post-Reformation graveslabs.

'Poltalloch Enclosure'

A collection of seven carved funerary monuments lie within the Malcolm of Poltalloch burial enclosure. This group comprises three medieval graveslabs of Loch Awe style; two medieval effigies in Loch Awe style; one late-medieval/post-Reformation graveslab; and a large flat slab (possibly from a table or chest tomb) dated 1685.

The effigies show warriors in quilted coats with bascinets (helm) and aventails (a chainmail quioif) and holding spears while grasping the hilt of their swords. A similar figure appears in miniature on one of the graveslabs. The graveslabs and the effigies are probably of 14th or 15th-century date.

All but one of these stones bears the later inscription 'POLTALLOCH'. It is possible that the family sought to create a sense of antiquity for themselves by re-using older monuments and thus marking their raised social standing, which they acquired through slavery-derived wealth.⁶

However, this practice appears to have been fairly widespread in Kilmartin in the 18th and 19th century. Records show that the Malcolm (or MacCallum) family took court-action against Alexander MacIsaac, the local miller to assert the family's ownership of several 'through-stanes' (recumbent graveslabs), and again resorted to the law to force the miller to remove inscriptions added to several medieval graveslabs.

Social overview

Although not formally assessed, there is some evidence to suggest that local residents hold mixed feelings about the archaeology of the Kilmartin area. On the one hand, the monuments have increased tourism revenues in the area, but at a cost to the local environment.

Spiritual overview

Although there is no evidence to gauge the current spiritual significance of any of these monuments, they lie within the grounds of the church which is still in use, and the churchyard is used as a place of commemoration. Many of the slabs were intended to mark the sites of graves and commemorate the dead, although no inscriptions are recorded.

The commissioning of religious sculpture, such as the crosses, would have been an act of devotion by the patron in the belief that their soul would benefit. The graveslabs are part of the process of commemoration, marking the graves of the deceased as well as the family burial plot.

Aesthetic overview

The churchyard occupies a spur from the east side of the valley and offers a fine view along the valley and the linear cemetery. The church dominates the village of Kilmartin and is visible for some considerable distance.

⁶ Mullen *et al* 2024, 53.

The monuments themselves are a remarkable collection of early Christian and late medieval art, with over 80 carved stones visible throughout the churchyard.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Our understanding and appreciation of the carved stones are marred by the absence of an archaeological context: we do not fully understand the development of the church at Kilmartin and how the stones fit into this scheme.
- Without inscriptions, it is difficult to set many of the stones within a social context.
- Many stones have been moved from their original sites resulting in the loss of relationship between grave, gravemarker, and the original church serving the community.
- No record of the grave of prominent individuals such as Colin Campbell of Glenorchy.
- There is a lack of high-quality modern drawings of the collection, with reliance being placed on antiquarian or photographic records.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Early medieval carvings may indicate the site has a long history as a place of Christian worship/commemoration.
- The development of a highly distinctive West Highland style of art is one of the most remarkable aspects of life in late medieval Scotland. Apart from a few rare artefacts, such as the Queen Mary harp and the Guthrie bell-shrine, this rich tradition is represented by monumental sculpture as found at Kilmartin churchyard.
- Association with Sir Colin Campbell of Glenorchy, buried at Kilmartin in 1480, and Neil Campbell, Bishop of the Isles, buried in 1627.
- The West Highland graveslabs represents a single stratum of medieval society, evidently one with sufficient wealth to commission carvings from local craftsmen.
- Several grave slabs have been re-used and family or estate names added later (Poltalloch and 'Duntroon' are two of the most prominent), possibly to lend the family name an air of antiquity.

ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

Significant collections of early medieval carvings exist at Iona Abbey; Eilean Mor, St Cormac's Chapel; Keills Chapel

Collections of late medieval West Highland carvings are displayed at Iona Abbey and Nunnery; Oransay Priory; Kilmodan churchyard; Kilberry Castle

The carved stone collection within Kilmartin Churchyard is a constituent of the rich archaeological landscape of the wider Kilmartin area and is therefore associated with the adjacent monuments with which it may be seen as a continuation of commemorative practice.

KEYWORDS

'Loch Awe school'; West Highland graveslab; chest-tomb; lapidarium; ring-headed cross, British Empire.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Mullen, S., Mackillop, A., and Driscoll, S. 2024 Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c. 1600-1997. (Edinburgh, Historic Environment Scotland). Available online: <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/archives-and-research/publications/publication/?publicationId=e192ea9f-0d7e-4745-b499-b0fb010a167a> (accessed: 17 December 2024).