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ALBA

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

IONA NUNNERY AND MACLEAN'S CROSS



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IONA NUNNERY AND MACLEAN'S CROSS

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Iona Nunnery comprises the ruins of an early 13th century Augustinian nunnery dedicated to St Mary the Virgin, one of only two Augustinian nunneries in Scotland and one of the best-preserved examples of a medieval convent in Britain. Founded c.1203 probably by Ranald, Lord of the Isles, the nunnery is contemporary with the adjacent abbey¹, and stands on the north edge of Baile Mòr, overlooking St Ronan's Bay.

The complex follows a conventional quadrangular plan with a church and to the south. Only part of the church and south range stand to any height.

To the east of the nunnery stands St Ronan's Chapel, a 12th or 13th century building that served as the island's parish church until the 17th century. Like the nunnery, the church is built of pink granite and dark grey rubble. The building has a modern roof and is used to store an extensive collection of sculptured stones, including part of the Iona collection of medieval effigies and graveslabs carved in the West Highland tradition.

MacLean's Cross stands on a rubble base in or near its original position on the west side of the road between the abbey and the nunnery. The tall decorated shaft and cross, formed from a single thin slab of chlorite schist, topped with a disc head with reduced lateral arms. It is a product of the Iona School of carvers and probably dates to 15th century.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- Burials from Cladh Ronain may date to the first Christian occupation of Iona between 6th and 8th century.
- First church built on the site of St Ronan's Church c.8th century.
- 12th century: the medieval chapel of St Ronans is built directly over the footprint of the earlier church.
- 1203: Somerled's son Ranald (Raghnaill) establishes a house of Augustinian canonesses at Cladh Ronain, and makes his sister Beathag the first prioress.
- In the 15th century, alterations are made to the conventual buildings, a wooden gallery is created at the W end of the nave, and the cloister garth is enlarged.
- In the 15th century, the MacLeans of Duart commissions a freestanding cross for the roadside between the abbey and nunnery, it is very similar to one erected at this period by Duncan MacMillan at Kilmory Knap chapel.
- 1569: Mary, Queen of Scots, grants the title of prioress and the nunnery to Marion MacLean, the last prioress.

¹ This document should be read in conjunction with the Statement of Significance for Iona Abbey

- 1574: Prioress Marion MacLean passes the nunnery and its lands to Hector MacLean of Duart.
- The possessions of the MacLeans of Duart, including Iona Abbey and the nunnery, pass to the Duke of Argyll.
- From the mid 17th century St Ronan's Church is no longer used as a parish church, although Cladh Ronain remains a burial ground for women and children until the 18th century.
- c.1830: Vaulting within the chancel collapses, leaving the church entirely roofless.
- 1874-75: Repairs at the nunnery are directed by the renowned architect Robert Rowand Anderson for the 4th Duke of Argyll.
- c.1890s: The Duke gifts Iona abbey and nunnery to the Iona Cathedral Trustees.
- 1917: Further repairs within the nunnery church.
- 1922: Iona Cathedral Trustees undertake restoration works on the sacristy and north chapel of the church.
- 1923 Further repairs carried out within the church. Work within St Ronan's Chapel reveals a gold finger ring, two fragments of a gold fillet, and a piece of gold wire.
- 1993 Excavations by AOC within St Ronan's Chapel reveal an earlier structure and evidence of an early Christian burial.
- 1995: AOC conduct geophysical survey, recording what may be the remains of a road surface to the north-east of the nunnery.

Archaeological Overview

- The condition and extent of the buildings are documented through accounts published by travellers and antiquarians, including Martin Martin (1694), Thomas Pennant (1779), Johnson and Boswell (1774) and Sir Walter Scott (1810). In the late 19th century several antiquarians published descriptions of the nunnery in varying degrees of detail, such as Skene's (1875) historical overview of the abbey and nunnery and the survey of the ruins by MacGibbon and Ross (1896-97).
- The earliest recorded archaeological discoveries made at the nunnery are the finds uncovered during repair works in 1922 and 1923. Four silver spoons and a gold fillet are found beneath the floor of the nunnery church. Fragments of linen cloth adhering to the spoons indicated that they had been wrapped and then buried. The fillet, found in two parts, comprises a long thin piece of beaten gold bearing an elaborate plant scroll pattern. These articles appear to have been hidden at an unknown date, as one of the silver spoons found within the nunnery church retained traces of roughly woven linen, presumably a bag or covering. The spoons are of fine workmanship and A O Curle considered them to be of 15th or 16th century date, based on stylistic similarities to English and Continental spoons. Curle suggests an earlier date for the gold fillets, possibly 13th or 14th century.
- In 1992 excavations within St Ronan's Chapel demonstrated the site's long history as a place of burial and worship. Three broad phases of activity

were defined. Between the mid- 6th and 12th centuries the site served as a burial ground, perhaps dating to the first period of missionary activity on the island. Unfortunately, there was a lack of dating evidence and the human remains were unsuitable for radiocarbon dating. Between the 8th and 12th centuries a small rectangular stone building, with lime-washed clay-bonded walls was erected in the burial ground, overlying a number of burials. Finally, in the 12th or 13th century, this building was demolished and the present St Ronan's Chapel erected directly over its footprint.

- A large number of later burials were recovered from within St Ronan's Chapel and the immediate area around it. The overwhelming majority of these burials were female or children, confirming traditional accounts that the site was reserved for women and children long after the church went out of use.
- A geophysical survey carried out in 1995 by AOC Archaeology Ltd traced a curvilinear anomaly interpreted as a road.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- The convent of St Mary the Virgin is one of the best examples of a small medieval convent in Britain, and is the only surviving house of Augustinian nuns in Scotland (the second house was in Perth). Although ruinous since the Reformation, the convent preserves its original 13th-century layout, although some changes to the church and the E and S ranges were made in the 15th century.
- In plan, the convent follows the conventional form of many other religious houses, its church being situated N of the cloister with domestic ranges on the E, S and W enclosing a central garth (enlarged in the 15th century). Although mostly reduced to footings, parts of the church and the gables of the S range stand to a substantial height.
- The W and N walls of the church stand to their original height, while the aisle chapel was restored in the 1920s. The church comprises an undivided nave and chancel, although there was almost certainly a timber screen between them. An aisle runs about two-thirds of the length of the nave. The nave arcade capitals show a range of carving, including animals and stylised plant decoration. The small chapel at the E end of the nave aisle is covered by a fine rib-vault, a smaller version of the vault that covered the chancel prior to its collapse in the 1830s. Along the W wall of the nave are six sculptured corbels, evidence of a 15th-century enlargement of the convent church by the insertion of a gallery. The corbels bear a variety of decoration, including the Annunciation, an angel, and a human face.
- Enlarged in the 15th century, the E range comprises three ground floor chambers, including the chapter-house with stone benches around its walls. Comparison with other religious houses indicates that the upper floor of the E range probably housed the dormitory. The S range housed the refectory,

a large chamber subsequently adapted for domestic use by the insertion of an upper floor. Within the Refectory is a possible *sheila-na-gig* carving (a female fertility symbol), although the sculpture is heavily worn. Almost nothing survives of the W range, the majority of it lies beneath the modern road that skirts the nunnery. Only the inner wall remains standing, and it is possible the range contained guest accommodation and the convent's public entrance.

- St Ronan's Chapel, a small rectangular building constructed of the same pink granite rubble and dark grey Torridonian stone, stands to the NW of the nunnery and survives to wallhead height. In the 1950s (renewed in 1990s by John Renshaw for the Iona Cathedral Trust), the Ministry of Works installed an inverted glass roof (as at Kilmory) with the intention of using the ruin as a stone store. The collection is significant, comprising fragments of early Christian crosses and late medieval West Highland graveslabs, several of which bear inscriptions and effigies, carved in the style of the Iona 'school'. Many of these slabs appear to commemorate nuns and noblewomen.
- MacLean's Cross is a product of the Iona School of carving – it is decorated on both faces, the front of the cross faces W and has a representation of the Crucified Saviour clothed in a long robe on the disc head and fleur-de-lis on the upper right-hand arm, the left arm had a chalice, now lost. The shaft has a continuous mesh of ornament of intertwined plant stems. The rear of the cross is decorated largely with intertwined foliaceous ornament but at the top of the shaft is a pair of animals and on the right arm there has been an angel. A panel at the foot of the shaft bears an inscription in Lombardic capitals that is no longer legible.

Social Overview

- The lack of any formal evaluation makes it difficult to assess the nunnery's present social significance.
- Iona's built and natural heritage attracts a large number of visitors each year.
- Although the nunnery has no direct association with St Columba, it is one part of the island's heritage, widely stated by many writers as occupying a special place in the national consciousness.

Spiritual Overview

- No formal studies have been carried out to gauge the nunnery's present spiritual significance. However, the island remains an important place of pilgrimage, contemplation and worship for Christians around the world. This is demonstrated by a religious group for women around the world taking a close interest in plans for the nunnery's conservation.

- As a former convent, the monument is likely to retain some religious associations, particularly as Cladh Ronain remained in use as a burial ground for women and children until the 18th century.

Aesthetic Overview

- Iona's unspoilt character cannot be stressed highly enough as it provides a stunning backdrop for the built heritage, and gives visitors a sense of the nunnery's original setting.
- The nunnery ruins themselves are particularly attractive, constructed of pink and grey masonry.
- The pleasant cloister garth offers visitors a peaceful and contemplative space in which to admire the ruins.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Our knowledge of the nunnery's history is very limited and patchy, particularly the role of the convent after the Reformation.
- The level of survival of the W range, most of which lies beneath the modern road, has never been tested.
- The lack of firm dates from the early Christian phases beneath St Ronan's Church limits our understanding of the site's early history.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Iona Nunnery is one of the best-preserved medieval nunneries in Britain, and one of only two houses of Augustinian nuns established in Scotland.
- Iona Nunnery forms part of an internationally-renowned group of monuments set within an almost wholly unspoilt landscape, attracting what is thought to be in excess of 100,000 visitors each year.
- The nunnery is built adjacent to an early Christian burial ground, which may be as old as the primary phase of missionary activity on Iona, forming a link between the early monastery and the later convent.
- Architectural details throughout the nunnery are of high quality indicating its importance and significance. The convent church possessed one of the few rib-vaults in the Western Highlands.
- The 15th century enlargements suggest the nunnery continued to flourish in the later Middle Ages, a time when many religious houses were declining.
- St Ronan's Church, adjacent to the nunnery, occupies the site of an early Christian church possibly dating from the 8th century, itself built on the site of an earlier burial ground. It houses an excellent collection of late medieval West Highland style graveslabs, all the work of masons of the Iona School of carving. Iona was instrumental in the creation of a distinctive West

Highland style of carving, one of the most important cultural developments in late medieval Scotland.

- Several famous travellers have visited the monument since the Reformation, including Martin Martin, James Boswell and Dr Samuel Johnson, Sir Walter Scott, Prince Albert and Felix Mendelssohn.
- Prince Albert's visit in 1847 helped create an interest in the island as a fashionable holiday destination, much in the same way as Victoria and Albert's travels through the Highlands did.
- MacLean's Cross is one of a significant group of 15th-century carved stones produced by the Iona School of carvers.

Associated Properties

Iona Abbey (early monastery of similar date to the early burials found at St Ronan's Chapel: medieval abbey re-founded 1203 by Reginald, Lord of the Isles. Iona abbey possesses one of the finest collections of West Highland sculpture, including slabs from the nunnery burial ground); **Paisley Abbey** (also founded by Reginald/Ranald); St Leonard's nunnery, Perth (only other recorded foundation of Augustinian nuns in Scotland); Duart Castle (the last prioress and convent passed their lands to the heritage of Hector MacLean of Duart in 1574); St Bothan's nunnery (near the of parish church at Abbey of Bathans); North Berwick Nunnery.

Keywords St Ronan; Earl Ragnall/Ranald/Reginald; Bethoc/Beathag/Beatrice; MacLean, Duke of Argyll, convent; Augustinian nuns; sheila-na-gig; corbel; cloister; chapter-house; refectory; rib-vault, late medieval graveslab