



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

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ALBA

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ST CLEMENT'S CHURCH, RODEL



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Cover image: Alexander MacLeod's tomb on the south side of the choir of St Clement's Church, Rodel, 1528. It is a medieval wall tomb, crowned by an arch and ornate with biblical carvings. A carved effigy of Alexander in armour lies below. © Crown Copyright HES.

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ST CLEMENT'S CHURCH, RODEL

Contents

SYNOPSIS	2
CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT	2
Historical overview	2
Archaeological overview	3
Architectural/Artistic overview	3
The church	4
The restorations of 1784 and 1873	4
The wall-tombs and sculpture	4
Social overview	5
Spiritual overview	5
Aesthetic overview	6
What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?	6
ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE	6
Key points	6
ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES	7
KEYWORDS	7
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	7

SYNOPSIS

St Clement's Church (*Tùr Chliamainn/Eaglais Roghadail*) stands in Rodel (*Roghadal*), at the southern end of the A859, and a little uphill from the harbour and hotel. The structure, built in the early 16th century by the MacLeods, lords of Dunvegan and Harris, is cruciform in plan with a prominent tower at its western end. It is the grandest medieval building in the Western Isles. Internally it houses three impressive 16th-century wall-tombs, all with effigies, and easily the best collection in the Highlands and Islands. The oldest and grandest is the tomb of Alasdair (Alexander) 'Crotach' MacLeod, dated 1528. Other funerary monuments are also on display in the church.

St Clement's ceased to serve as a place of worship following the Protestant Reformation in 1560, fell into dereliction, but has been restored twice – in 1784 and 1873.

[Note: the adjoining graveyard is NOT in Historic Scotland's care.]

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical overview

- **1520s** – Alasdair (Alexander) 'Crotach' (or hump-backed) MacLeod, 8th lord of Dunvegan (Skye) and Harris, builds the present church at Rodel as the burial place of the chiefs of Clan MacLeod. His splendid wall-tomb, in the south wall of the choir, is dated 1528.
- **1539** – Alasdair's son, William, succeeds his father (who is still alive) as clan leader and adds a second wall-tomb, in the south wall of the nave. David John McPersoun is mentioned as chaplain of St Columba's altar there in 1540.
- **1545x47** – Alasdair MacLeod dies and is laid to rest in his wall-tomb.
- **1549** – Dean Donald Monro, archdeacon of the Isles, visits Rodel and records that the church was built by Macleod of Harris.
- **1551** – William MacLeod dies and is laid to rest in his wall-tomb.
- **c.1557** – William's successor, John MacLeod of Minigish, dies; the third wall-tomb, in the south transept, may be where he is laid to rest.
- **1560** – in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, St Clement's ceases to serve as a church. However, the building's use as a burial-place continues.
- **1674** – Mairi nighean Alasdair Ruaidh (or Mary MacLeod) is buried in the church. Born at Rodel in 1569, the daughter of 'Red Alastair'

Macleod spent most of her days at Dunvegan Castle, where she nursed five clan chiefs, and achieved fame as a poet.

- **1784** – Captain Alexander MacLeod of Bernerary has the derelict building re-roofed, as part of a programme of work in Rodel that includes building a new harbour. The new roof soon catches fire, and is replaced in 1787 (as an inscription on the north wall of the nave relates). Macleod made much of his money through working for the East India Company. Imperial profits thus both helped to preserve and contributed to the ruination of the church.¹
- **1873** – Lady Catherine, Dowager Countess of Dunmore, widow of the 6th Earl of Dunmore, owner of Harris, has the church extensively repaired and re-roofed by the architect Alexander Ross. (Lady Catherine is credited with creating the iconic Harris Tweed brand.) The existing roof and the pyramidal spire on the tower dates from this time.
- **1912** – St Clement's is entrusted into State care. W T Oldrieve, for the Ministry of Works, carries out additional restoration works.

Archaeological overview

Effectively nothing is known of the underlying archaeology of the site, and the subsequent works of restoration (1784, 1873 and 1913) will have limited the opportunity for standing building archaeology. This is to be regretted because the possibility exists that the present building either (a) incorporates older fabric, or (b) overlies an earlier structure. This possibility is supported by the church's dedication to St Clement, the third bishop of Rome after St Peter, who was martyred in AD 99. Clement became a favoured saint of the medieval Norse world, which included the Western Isles.

The most remarkable small-find from St Clement's is that of a small brass chalice, discovered in the graveyard in 1897, and dated to the 18th century.

Architectural/Artistic overview

St Clement's is generally considered to be the most ambitious and outstanding medieval building in the Western Isles. Although restored on several occasions, the building has retained much of its original (16th-century) form. It incorporates some exceptional sculptural elements, most

¹ For further information on the connection between Properties in Care and the British Empire download the full report from HES website: [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c.1600-1997](#)

notably three elaborate canopied wall-tombs internally, and fascinating carvings on the outside of the tower.

The church

The church, constructed of rubble masonry with schist and freestone for the finer dressings, is cruciform in plan, with a high rectangular tower at the west end. This cruciform aisle-less plan form was particularly favoured in the later Middle Ages for churches of middling scale (for example, **Tullibardine Chapel**, for the Murrays).

The church, however, may not be all of one build, and the possibility exists that Alasdair ‘Crotach’ MacLeod was enlarging an existing building. The flanking transepts, for example, are misaligned with each other, are of different sizes and with different arches to the nave (the north transept round and built of schist, the south transept pointed and built of freestone). They have, however, the same jamb mouldings, suggesting that they are likely to be near-contemporary. These mouldings, together with the wheel-tracery in the east window, point to **Iona Abbey** (mid-15th-century) as the possible source of inspiration.

The restorations of 1784 and 1873

The two programmes of restoration, although done with the best of intentions, have undoubtedly removed evidence that may have helped in determining the original building history of the church. As Fawcett observes: ‘the way in which a base course runs along only part of the south wall might suggest that the relative homogeneity we now see is more the result of these modern interventions than of the initial design.’ The west tower has evidence pointing to its completion only over several campaigns (for example, changes in quoin forms and modifications to the character of masonry), but these changes too are more likely to be the result of the later restorations. Certainly, the present embattled parapet dates from the 1780s and the present pyramidal spire from 1873.

However, there is no doubt that the two restorations have bequeathed a building of quiet, reflective charm. The name of the architect responsible for the 1784 work is not known to us, but the architect of the 1873 scheme was Alexander Ross, who also designed numerous churches elsewhere in the Highlands and Islands (for example, St Andrew’s Episcopal Cathedral, Inverness) as well as Lerwick Town Hall.

The wall-tombs and sculpture

The church contains an unparalleled collection of later medieval sculpture. Of outstanding significance are the three elaborate canopied wall-tombs, ‘the most impressive such collection in the Highlands and Islands’ (Gifford). The finest of the three, on account of its artistic quality, content and remarkable state of preservation, is also the earliest – that built for Alasdair MacLeod in 1528. In addition to Biblical imagery, it has a range of secular symbolism relating to the MacLeod clan and the attributes of Gaelic

lordship (castle, galley, hunting scene, etc). The 8th chief's effigy depicts him in plate armour and guarded by crouching lions.

The architectural sculpture on the tower's exterior is also of considerable interest in its own right. Most notable are those on the third storey, depicting a bishop (St Clement?), two fishermen (St Peter and St Andrew?), a bull's head, and, somewhat curiously, a crouching nude female figure nursing a child; this last belongs to a family of such late medieval female effigies, known as *Sheela ne gigs* (*Sìle nan cìoch*), that are found throughout Ireland and parts of Britain open to Irish influence (there is another on **Iona Nunnery**).

Social overview

St Clement's, Rodel, is a significant visitor attraction in the Western Isles. So popular has it become in recent years, with increasing numbers of people visiting by coach tours, that the church is generally kept open throughout the summer months, whereas the key was formerly held in the adjacent hotel. Public toilets have also recently been built in the village to cope with demand!

Although the property features on numerous websites, it is not clear what other social role it plays in community life, other than the continuing use of the adjacent churchyard as an occasional burial place.

Spiritual overview

The dedication to St Clement is unusual, and suggests that there may have been a place of worship on the site in medieval Norse times.

The building of the church by the chiefs of Clan MacLeod, and its use as the family mausoleum, provides evidence for the importance its Gaelic lords placed on the Church as a means of reinforcing and articulating their authority, as well as being a medium for their religious devotion. The mountains of Harris are clearly visible from Dunvegan Castle, on the Isle of Skye, their chief secular seat, and the two centres (spiritual and temporal) served to underpin their control over their maritime lordship.

The church has not served as a regular place of worship for over 400 years (since the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation of 1560). It is occasionally used for wedding ceremonies.

The extent to which other visitors recognise and use the church as an informal place of worship is not known.

Aesthetic overview

The church, and its tower in particular, make a most striking and attractive impact on the surrounding landscape.

The church has the modern-day appearance of being in a relatively isolated, tranquil and scenic location. However, the good quality of the land in the area, and the importance of the sea for communication in bygone days, should not be forgotten.

Internally, all but parts of the tower are lit only by natural light, which significantly enhances the atmosphere within the building. The church space has been described as ‘mysterious’.

The three elaborate wall-tombs, and to a lesser extent the other sculptural detail, contribute a significant note of quality to an otherwise comparatively plain building.

The surrounding graveyard, with its array of funerary monuments, burial enclosures and boundary wall, add significantly to the charming setting of the church.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Was there an older ecclesiastical structure on the site, as suggested by the dedication to St Clement? This can only be answered by archaeological investigation.
- What is the detailed building history of the present structure? Although there are subtle hints in the fabric that the work of Alasdair ‘Crotach’ MacLeod in the 1520s may have been a rebuilding of an existing structure, the jury must remain ‘out’ as to this possibility. The several ‘restorations’ make resolution of the matter more difficult.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- St Clement’s, Rodel, is the grandest medieval building in the Western Isles, and the second largest ecclesiastical structure in the entire Hebrides, second only to **Iona Abbey**.
- St Clement’s is intimately linked with the MacLeods of Dunvegan and Harris, chiefs of Clan MacLeod.

- The church, although somewhat plain architecturally, has a notably elaborate 'Latin cross' plan for its Hebridean location, and some quite remarkable sculptural elements.
- The three wall-tombs with their effigies form easily the best collection in the Highlands and Islands. That of Alasdair 'Crotach' MacLeod has been described as 'the masterpiece of West Highland Sculpture' (Steer and Bannerman).
- The adjacent graveyard, with its array of funerary monuments and private burial aisles, contributes significantly to our visitors' appreciation of the monument.
- The setting of the church is outstanding.

ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

Some other MacLeod of Harris and Skye properties: Duirinish Old Parish Church, Dunvegan; Dunvegan Castle

Other medieval church sites in the Western Isles: Eaglais na h-Aoidhe, Aignish, Uidh (Lewis); Ensay (Harris); Nunton (Benbecula); Rudh' an Teampall, near Northton (Harris); Teampall Eoin, Bragar (Lewis); Teampall Mholuaidh, Eoropie (Lewis); Tobha Mor, Howmore (South Uist); Teampall na Trionaid, Carinish (North Uist)

Some other architectural comparisons: **Iona Abbey; Iona Nunnery; Tullibardine Chapel**

Some other medieval canopied tombs with secular effigies: **Beaulieu Priory** (Mackenzie of Kintail); Corstorphine Collegiate Church (Forrester of Corstorphine); Cullen Collegiate Church (Ogilvie of Findlater); Fordyce Church (Ogilvie of Deskford); **Lincluden Collegiate Church** (Douglas); **St Bride's, Douglas** (Douglas); **St Mary's, Rothesay** (Stewart); **Seton Collegiate Church** (Seton)

KEYWORDS

church; tower; medieval; tomb; effigy; graveyard; Macleod of Skye and Harris; Lady Catherine, Dowager Countess of Dunmore; Alexander Ross

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