



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

ÀRAINNEACHD
EACHDRAIDHEIL
ALBA

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

EILEAN MÒR



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Cover image: View of 10th century cross shaft at St Cormac's Chapel on Eilean Mòr. © Crown Copyright HES.

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

EILEAN MÓR

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Situated at the mouth of Loch Sween, Eilean Mòr is the largest and most westerly of a group of islands in the Sound of Jura. The island has a long history as a religious retreat and place of pilgrimage, spanning almost 1000 years, and is traditionally associated with the Leinster saint Abban moccu Cormaig who is said to be buried near the island's chapel.

Three sites on the island are in care, although much of the island is a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

St. Cormac's Cave, at the S end of the island, according to tradition served as the saint's hermitage. It certainly appears to have been in use during the early Christian period for two crosses are incised on the rock inside. Near the cave is a ruined structure interpreted as a chapel or shrine building, possibly designed to control access to the cave by pilgrims.

St Cormac's Chapel, built in the 13th century in the middle of the island was originally designed as a simple, rectangular church of the type found throughout the Highlands. The chapel probably occupies an early Christian church of burial ground, which is enclosed by an oval bank, most of which lies outwith the area in care. In the 14th century, John, 1st Lord of the Isles paid for repairs and alterations, including the insertion of a barrel vault over the chancel that still survives. The chancel also houses a fine late medieval effigy and the fragment of a second. The chapel subsequently became a dwelling, probably in the 18th century. Agricultural remains on the north side of the island, and traces of buildings around the chapel, relate to this period of occupation.

Until 1937, the shaft of a late medieval free-standing cross stood on the island's highest point. Erected by Mariota de Ros, wife of Donald, 2nd Lord of the Isles, with the help of the island's resident priest and hermit, it probably dates from the late 14th century. Although the original is now in the collection of the Museum of Scotland, a replica remains in its place.

Recent research into the relationships between the Properties in Care of Scottish Ministers and the British Empire¹ has highlighted that Eilean Mor has 'property' empire connection² as it was owned by the Malcolms of Poltalloch. 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

¹ 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)

² 'Property' connection describes land or buildings owned by either an established propertied family which participated in the Empire, or a recently enriched family which, through involvement in colonial activities, acquired the means to secure property. See Mullen *et al* 2024, 30-31 for a full definition of typology.

when slavery was abolished in Britain. Neil Malcolm 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.³

Outwith the area in care is a visitor's centre and an associated outbuilding erected by the Eilean Mòr MacCormick Trust. The visitor centre is built in the style of a traditional bothy, with stone walls and a thatched roof weighted down with stones.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical overview

7th century: early Christian hermits occupy Eilean Mòr, and an eremitic community may have settled on the island, possibly near the medieval chapel.

13th century: construction of the chapel.

Mid-14th century: repairs to the chapel's roof undertaken by John, 1st Lord of the Isles (d.1387), probably included the insertion of a vault in the chancel.

Late 14th century: Mariota de Ros, wife of Donald, 2nd Lord of the Isles, and John, the island's priest and hermit, commission a high cross to stand on the highest point of Eilean Mor.

1573: following the Reformation, the 6th Earl of Argyll grants the endowments of the chapel to Donald MacNeill of Tainish. This includes the island of 'Sanct Makchormick', the right of patronage of the chaplainry, the adjacent islands of Corr Eilean and Eilean Ghamhna and the 'lands known as Sant-Colme-Coif' (Cove).

1643: the island passes to the MacNeills of Gallchoille, and remains a possession of the MacNeill family until the 19th century.

Late 17th/early 18th century: the chapel is altered for domestic use, possibly as the residence of a tacksman. Agricultural remains on the north side of the island and buildings around the chapel probably relate to this period.

Late 18th century: Eilean Mòr reported as deserted and used only for grazing, with the chapel serving as a byre.

³ Mullen *et al* 2024, 50-55.

1873: James Drummond, the noted antiquarian, visits the island's chapel and cave noting the wretched condition of the chapel's interior.

1926/7: the chapel and cross-base come into care.

1937: the late medieval cross erected by Mariota de Ros is removed to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland in Edinburgh, and a cast by Mancini of Edinburgh erected in its place.

1979: Eilean Mòr is bequeathed to the Scottish National Party.

1991: the concrete cast erected in 1937 is removed and a new replica, carved in stone by HS masons, is put in its place.

Archaeological Overview

There are no records of archaeological works having been carried out on the island, but the island contains a diverse range of archaeological remains, from early Christian sites to evidence of post-medieval agricultural activity and associated occupation remains. However, much of this later archaeology extends well beyond the areas in care.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

St Cormac's Chapel

St Cormac's Chapel stands at the NE side of the island, near an inlet forming a natural landing place. Built in the early 13th century, the chapel was extensively altered in the 14th century and converted for domestic use in the 17th or 18th century. By the 19th century, the building was used as a convenient place for sheltering cattle.

The chapel measures 9.5m from east to west by 4.2m within rubble walls of almost 1m in thickness. Internally, the chapel is subdivided into chancel and nave by a gabled wall opened by a semi-circular archway blocked by a screen wall containing a doorway flanked by windows. The building is partially roofed: the chancel is covered by a pitched roof of stone flags, although its construction is poorly understood as it is overgrown with grass, while the nave is roofless, although its walls are well preserved and survive to wall-head height. The original entrance into the chapel, a plain arched entrance in the north wall, was blocked during the post-Reformation alterations and replaced by a plain lintelled doorway in the south wall.

The chapel appears to have had an upper storey, as there is a loft or passageway under the apex of the chancel roof while the upper part of the nave gable has a chimney flue and fireplace built against it. It is unclear whether this upper storey is original or was a later addition.

A low barrel vault covers the chancel, and St Cormac's is the only church in Argyll, other than Iona Abbey, to retain its medieval vaulting and much of its original plasterwork. Almost certainly, the vault was inserted in the 14th century during the repairs by John, 1st Lord of the Isles. A window in the south wall of the chancel was also blocked, and the pair of lancet windows in the east gable altered. Beneath these windows are the remains of an altar base, while an L-shaped aumbry is set into the east wall.

In the chancel's south wall is a large, round-headed niche containing the headless effigy of a priest in eucharistic vestments. Opposite, in the north wall, are two smaller recesses of similar form, both empty, although the east niche has a small window set behind it.

St Cormac's Cave

Situated at the north end of a rocky gully on the south-east shore of Eilean Mòr, St Cormac's Cave is entered by a vertical hole in the rock face, although originally there was a narrow tunnel of about 3m in length, reached by an open passage about 3m from the north-east corner of an adjacent building. Remains of the tunnel, which was blocked due to the collapse of its roofing slabs, can be still be seen. The cave, which measures 2.8m from north to south by 0.8m to 1.3m in width and 2m in height, contains little other than two incised crosses on the east wall. The first is a marigold or hexafoil cross, while nearby is an equal-armed cross set on a pedestal carved to resemble the early Christian 'Chi-Rho' symbol (see drawings). RCAHMS identifies both crosses as being of 7th or 8th century date.

In the mouth of the gully stand the ruins of a drystone structure, roughly square on plan. The building's north-west and south-west walls are built against the hillside, and are of unknown thickness, but on the south-east, the wall measures up to 1.6m in thickness and surviving height. The wall shows some signs of corbelling, although the building is not thought to be a stone-roofed oratory. The north-east wall is formed by the vertical cliff-face, except at the north end where drystone walling forms a narrow passage leading to the original cave entrance. From what survives, it is unclear whether the building was roofed or was simply a vestibule. Its association with the cave beyond suggests it to be medieval or earlier in date and was probably designed as a shrine or chapel for pilgrims, and could have been used to restrict the numbers entering the cave.

Sculpture

In addition to the markings on the cave wall, there are six other pieces of sculpture known to be associated with Eilean Mòr. However, only three remain on the island. The chapel houses a priest's effigy and the fragment of another effigy, while part of a 10th century cross stands near the chapel.

Unfortunately, most of the priest's head is destroyed, but the remainder of the effigy is well-preserved, showing the figure of a cleric in finely-detailed

eucharistic vestments. The head is set within a cusped niche, while the top left corner of the slab depicts a chalice resting on an altar with other holy vessels.

A fragment of another, possibly unfinished effigy shows a roughly tooled outline of a single foot, with an attendant or perhaps an angel at the right, extending an arm towards the ankle. The stone appears to have been shaped for re-use as a building stone at a later date.

Standing near the chapel is St Cormac's Cross, a ringed free-standing cross believed to be of 10th century date. Only the shaft and lower part of the cross-head survives, and much of the decoration on the west face is damaged. Decoration on the east face shows a pair of wrestling beak-faced monsters, a panel of key pattern, followed by three motifs that appear to lack any form of vertical demarcation. The lowest figure is a hooded rider, although the horse seems out of proportion for the small rider. Above is a large monster with a curled tail. The creature grips what appears to be a tapering snake in its maw. Both its tail and a curved crest are attached to the third motif, an interlaced group of four fantastic beasts above. The west face is bordered by broad bands of knotwork extending to the stumps of the ring, but little other decoration can be seen due to the damage mentioned above.

Three sculptured stones known to originate from Eilean Mòr are in the collection of National Museums of Scotland. These include:

A free-standing disc-headed cross carved in the West Highland style, probably erected in the late 14th or early 15th century. Carved in the style of the Iona School, the cross bears the figure of the Crucified Saviour flanked by the Virgin and St John, while a miniature of an abbot or bishop is carved on the shaft.

Fragments of a second late medieval free-standing cross. The fragments, two pieces of the shaft and a section of the crosshead, are inscribed, although little of the text survives.

An early Christian cross-marked slab, gifted to the Society of Antiquaries in 1873 by Sir James Young Simpson. RCAHMS suggests its similarities with other slabs at Duntaynish House and Inverneill House indicate that these too may have been removed from the island.

Social Overview

Although no formal studies have been undertaken, the archaeological remains on the island are likely to be one of the main reasons for visitors coming to the island. The island remains important to the Scottish National Party.

Spiritual Overview

Although the chapel is long disused, the island has a long history of religious worship and occupation, from the 7th or 8th century until at least the Reformation.

Tradition associates the island with St Cormac (the Leinster saint Abban moccu Corbmaic). His grave is reputedly marked by the fragmentary 10th-century cross standing near the chapel.

Aesthetic Overview

Eilean Mòr is an exceptionally remote and almost entirely unspoilt island, far removed from everyday life. Here visitors have an opportunity to experience the solitude that the early Christian and medieval hermits sought.

Major gaps in understanding

- Our understanding of the island's archaeology is limited as Eilean Mòr has never been comprehensively surveyed.
- We know very little about the date and function of the structure near St Cormac's Cave.
- The nature and extent of early Christian occupation of the island remains largely conjectural, and it is possible that the medieval chapel stands on the site of earlier structures, possibly a small monastery.
- It is not known whether there is any basis to the tradition that St Cormac came to the island as a hermit

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Other than Iona Abbey, St Cormac's Chapel is the only ecclesiastical site in Argyll to have its original medieval vaulting. The chancel vault retains a considerable quantity of plasterwork.
- The island is closely associated with the early Christian saint Abban moccu Corbmaic, founder and patron saint of Keills Chapel. According to tradition, the saint is said to have used the cave as a hermitage and is buried near the chapel, the grave marked by the 10th century cross. Whatever the truth of these traditions, Eilean Mòr was probably being

used in the early Christian period as a place of retreat, and continued to be occupied by hermits into the late medieval period.

- The chapel enjoyed the patronage of the Lords of the Isles. According to the Book of Clanranald, John, 1st Lord of the Isles, paid for repairs to the chapel in the 14th century, while Mariota de Ros, wife of John's son, had a cross erected on the island.
- Following the Reformation, the chapel was adapted for use as a domestic dwelling.
- The West Highland style sculpture associated with the island is particularly important as the development of this highly distinctive artform is one of the most remarkable aspects of life in late medieval Scotland. Other than a few rare artefacts, such as the Queen Mary harp and the Guthrie bell-shrine, this unique tradition is represented by monumental sculpture.

Associated Properties

Keills Church (also dedicated to Abban moccu Corbmaic); **St Ninian's Cave** (an example of a cave used as an early Christian hermitage); **Ardchattan Priory** (similarities in design between early Christian graveslabs and the 10th century cross); **Iona Abbey** (production centre for the effigy and late medieval cross); **Eileach an Naoimh** (the island has a similar history as a place of early monasticism, medieval worship and post-Reformation agricultural use).

Keywords

Abban moccu Corbmaic; early Christian; hexafoil; chi-rho; ringed cross; St Cormac's Cave; St Cormac's Chapel; Keills; Lord of the Isles; vault; effigy; freestanding cross; West Highland style; Iona School; Reformation; MacNeill; tacksman; corn-drying kiln.

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