

10 Discussion

10.1 Prehistory

Although this report concentrates on the early-medieval and later structures, it is worth mentioning briefly that the May was within reach of prehistoric people based on both sides of the Forth. It therefore seems likely that the food resources in and around the island were exploited on a seasonal basis throughout the prehistoric period. Residual finds of flints and domestic prehistoric pottery were found both at the monastic site and in the trenches focused on the post-medieval 'village'. More significantly, the suggestion can also be made that the island became an important burial place, based on the discovery of ceramics usually associated with funerary activity in the Bronze Age. It is possible that prehistoric burial activity was focused on the raised beach, close to the natural harbours at the S end of the island, as in later times.

10.2 Period I: early medieval

From a comparative study of the relatively few Early Christian ecclesiastical, monastic and burial sites that have been excavated, it can be seen that the May exhibits a number of the defining characteristics shared by the sites outlined above. Most sites have a long tradition of saintly associations and dedications, with the saint considered to be present as the guardian of the place. The May has burials which might pre-date the construction of the first church or chapel. It is considered that the earliest church-building tradition used timber, although nowhere as yet has produced convincing evidence of this, with the possible exception of the Hallow Hill cemetery. The earliest groups of cists on the May, which pre-date the first stone church, have a distinctive NE–SW orientation. It is tempting to suggest that these were aligned with one or more lost timber chapels, subsequently replaced by the first stone church on a more orthodox E–W orientation. The later burials were truer to this orientation.

The Early Christian monks may have been the first people to occupy the island permanently throughout the year. The original 15m raised beach, consisting of rounded beach-rolled stones, had been delineated on the seaward side by the construction of at least three phases of drystone walling and revetments, the first of which pre-dates the burials dated to the fifth to the ninth century. Stone was available to be quarried from the weathered bluff that overshadowed and defined the W side of the cemetery. The motivation for these extensions would appear to have been a desire to enlarge the defined cemetery area, and to stop this from collapsing down the steeply sloping E scarp above Kirk

Haven. This slope was to be the cause of structural problems throughout the medieval period. There was no artefactual evidence dating the revetments, although there is a series of radiocarbon dates from burials that seal them and provide *terminus ante quem* dates for their construction. The revetment 895 at the E end of the cemetery trench predates the fifth/ninth century, and revetment 466, beneath the chapter house, pre-dates the seventh/ninth century. If, as seems likely, the revetments were extended sequentially towards the sea, then it is probable that the platform originated in the Early Christian period, in the fifth/sixth century. It was extended on the seaward side on at least three occasions until the 13th century, when the Cluniac monastic church was constructed (see Chapter 5.3.1). Twenty per cent of the area of the cemetery was partially excavated, producing 56 skeletons, of which only 17 were dated.

It is possible that the platform originated as a series of burial cairns which became conjoined. Parallels for the construction of cemetery platforms or for the modification of raised beaches for the purpose of burial are rare in Scotland. The raised beach at Port an Fhìr-bhreige, Iona, has a superficial similarity in that it supports a group of 50 cairns. As these cairns have not been excavated, we do not know whether they were grave markers, or were created by newly arrived pilgrims, or were built as a penance by monks (Ritchie 1997, 25–6). Recent investigations on St Kilda have revealed how a natural scree slope had been transformed into stone-revetted terraces during a period spanning early Christian times (Johnson and Pollard 1999).

In early cemeteries associated with monastic sites, there is evidence of gender separation known from both historical traditions and from excavated evidence. At both Portmahomack and the May, the majority of burials were male, including groups of very mature males. At the May the overall ratio of men to women from the excavated sample was 4:1, with one group of cists (Group 1) containing exclusively middle-aged and old men dated to the fifth to the seventh century; could this area of the cemetery have been reserved for the founding fathers (see p 17)? Another extraordinary feature of the population of the dead here was within the group of regimented, cisted burials, dated to the seventh to the tenth century (Group 2). By contrast, this group was mixed in age and sex, with many exhibiting pronounced pathological evidence of deep-set disease and infection which had penetrated into their bones. Chronic disease proved to be a defining feature of a surprisingly large proportion of the burials from this period on. Were these people attending a famed monastic hospital on the island, or simply the sick on their final pilgrimage to seek a cure at the shrine of St Ethernan (see p 91)?

It appears that there was little human impact on the environment of the island prior to the tenth century. Small numbers of sheep and cattle were probably grazed, but there was no evidence for arable farming on the island, although it is likely that gardens were located in sheltered spots. Such woodland as was found on the island diminished during this period. In all, the environmental evidence suggests that prior to the tenth century any settlement on the island was small-scale and probably seasonal. The excavations produced evidence for metal-working and wool spinning. There was also evidence for the butchery of sheep, goats, pig, seal and seabirds, which would have provided the community with meat, milk, wool, skin and oil. Fishing would have taken place off the rocks and from boats in deeper water.

The May has produced exceptional evidence of stone church-building, possibly dating back to the tenth century, and bearing a remarkable similarity to the clay-bonded church found under St Ronan's. They were both sub-square in plan and lacking mortar in their construction. The May church was 3.2m N–S by 4m internally (6m long externally), whereas St Ronan's was only slightly larger, both with a central W door. Both were significantly redeveloped with the W end remaining fixed at the former, and the E end remaining fixed at the latter. Although possible fragments of earlier churches have been found at other sites, these are the only two from this period N of the Forth where complete ground plans can be compared. The May church was rebuilt and extended 1.6m to the E, possibly within 50 years of having been built. The May may have been too small for congregational worship, with access to the church being reserved for specific sacramental rituals.

Accidents of survival, coupled with the necessary constraints of excavation strategies, have contributed to the production of only a partial picture of monastic life. Sites such as Inchmarnock and Portmahomack have produced only slight evidence of the early church that was at the very heart of such establishments, whereas the limited areas excavated at the May have meant that the substantial evidence for craft and metalworking found at the other two sites is entirely lacking. A major activity, recognised at both Inchmarnock and Portmahomack, was related to literacy and learning, with evidence that manuscript production was a common feature of such monasteries. The lack of sculpture at the May is curious and, bearing in mind the intensive nature of the excavation which included so much of the burial ground, difficult to explain in the context of this being a ubiquitous feature of the other sites.

A number of the sites, including Iona, feature kerbed paved road and surfaces, no doubt required for processional use and indicative of a degree of centralised planning. These connected the church to the burial grounds, the workshops, stores and sleeping huts. Such outbuildings were not found at the May but possibly await discovery in the area immediately N of the burial ground that was used for naval accommodation in World War II.

The May excavation results suggest the possibility of a fifth-century Christian origin for the burial ground, on a site well-suited to eremitical use. So even before the Benedictines arrived here in the mid-12th century, the island had hosted seven centuries of monastic settlement – within organisational frameworks and allegiances which must have changed on a regular basis. These changes must have produced physical results in terms of the use and development of the place.

It is important to bear in mind that the Forth was liminal space, sometimes disputed territory. This had been the boundary between Iron Age tribes, and was then the space between the Romanised world and Caledonia. From the seventh to the eleventh century the May was in the boundary zone between the Pictish/Scottish kingdoms and Northumbria. One of the defining locations for a church is where it 'could have served as a place of mediation on a hostile or unstable boundary', and at times the May could have served this purpose (O'Sullivan 1998). At times, the dangerous nature of this space might have been attractive to some monks and priests, keen on the prospect of martyrdom! The paradox of the May, in terms of monastic suitability, is that it was a 'desert place in the ocean' indeed, while at the same time being at the gateway to the centres of power and prestige in Scotland up the Forth.

Some questions are left hanging:

- i* What do the different forms of burial, overlapping within the same period, represent? Had these individuals been recognised as being in differing penitential states at their death?
- ii* Should we follow an Ionan/Irish model for the development of church-building construction techniques, seeing building in stone as a relatively late feature? After all, the May and the E coast in general also received Continental and Anglian influences. As yet, we do not have sufficient evidence to create an accurate model of the development of church building.
- iii* And most importantly, what is represented by the construction of the first stone church, and its subsequent enlargement? Could this be a refoundation, as suggested in this paper at Portmahomack, with a re-endowment by a secular leader wiping away what went before, as seen at Dunkeld in the ninth century? Or could it simply be that the May shrine was attracting growing numbers of pilgrims, and that a more appropriate reliquary church was required?

10.2.1 The long-cist cemetery

The long-cist cemetery on the May, which from the radiocarbon dates originated sometime during the fifth to the seventh century, was well laid out, although the cists themselves were not very well constructed compared with those at Catstane (Midlothian), Hallow Hill (Fife), or Parkburn (Midlothian), perhaps due to

the limitations of the available stone slabs. Most long-cist cemeteries have been uncovered accidentally during ground levelling or road construction, and only a few have been properly excavated. Published long-cist cemeteries include Parkburn, Lasswade (Henshall 1956), Catstane (Cowie 1978), Four Winds, Longniddry (Dalland 1992), Avonmill Road, Linlithgow (Dalland 1993), Hallow Hill (Proudfoot 1996) and Whithorn (Hill 1997). Other cemeteries in Fife discovered in the past and poorly recorded include one at Crail (NSA 1845, 956) and at Old Haiks, Kingsbarns (NSA 1845, 956). A recent discovery was at Thornybank, Midlothian (Rees 2002).

10.2.1.1 *Origin of long-cist cemeteries*

The use of individual long cists is known from pre-Christian periods (Ashmore 1980; Whimster 1981). However, it is thought that long cists in well laid out cemeteries, with E–W orientation, lacking grave goods or cairns, can be taken as indicative of Christian burial. As more cemeteries are excavated, the evidence indicates that some were located on existing pagan burial sites. At Addinston Farm, Lauder, the cemetery displayed a variety of burial types, as long cists and short cists with crouched burials were located around several cairns containing cremations (Rosehill 1872). Of the 54 Scottish long-cist cemeteries which Henshall listed, there were a further four long-cist cemeteries associated with possible prehistoric short-cists. Since Henshall's work, additions to this list would include firstly Hallow Hill, where two large pagan short-cist graves were found, both containing children accompanied by Roman objects and both sealed by a cairn (Proudfoot 1996, 413–14), and secondly Thornybank, where two probable Pictish square ditch barrows were found (Rees 1997). Another example is at Chapel Hill, Balladoole, Isle of Man, where evidence for prehistoric burials of both cremations and inhumations were found within a later hillfort, which was then used for a long-cist cemetery, and finally by a pagan Norse boat burial (Bersu and Wilson 1966, 1; Thomas 1971b, 56–7).

At the Catstane cemetery, near Edinburgh, the graves were focused on a monumental stone. The cemetery consisted of rows of well-spaced long cists located to the SE of a late sixth-century Latin inscribed standing stone (Foster 1996; Rutherford and Ritchie 1974). As well as a few undated cists, laid out in a radial pattern around the stone there was the main group of long cists, radiocarbon dated to the fifth/eighth century, which were located to the SE of the stone on a more regular layout. At Hallowhill, St Andrews, the unenclosed cemetery was laid out in clusters of rows on either side of a roadway, which the excavator suggests were family groupings (Proudfoot 1996). At Parkburn there were three groups of burials, two on either side of a wall and one further away to the SW. The cists were fairly well spaced, and in rows. What

was thought to be (without radiocarbon dates) the later group of burials, to the N of the wall, consists of rows and lines of graves with a central 'congested' area, with overlapping cists, associated with a layer of charcoal (Henshall 1956, 260). Henshall suggests that this represents the burning of a chapel. At Thornybank, Midlothian, the 115 burials consisted of long cists laid out in orderly rows interspersed with dug graves in a more random but well-spaced manner (Rees 2002). The cemetery also included a significant burial consisting of a rectangular grave pit surrounded by four post-holes. There were also two square barrows, thought to be Pictish, on this site and these do appear to have been a focus for the cemetery. At Whithorn the cemetery was laid out in regular lines and rows. In the second phase, a small, double-walled, timber-built enclosure may have surrounded a special grave and acted as a focus for the cemetery (Hill 1997, 91). A lintel grave with a massive cover slab (18) formed part of this shrine. The evidence from long-cist cemeteries so far indicates that there may have been one or more foci for the burials. These may have been in the form of an earlier pagan grave, an Early Christian saint's grave, or perhaps a road.

10.2.1.2 *Distribution*

The distribution of long-cist cemeteries is concentrated in the SE, from East Lothian, through Fife and into Angus and Perthshire (Henshall 1956; Foster 1996; Proudfoot 1998). They tend to be located in river valleys and on coastal sites (Etheridge 1993). The May cemetery fits within the known distribution pattern, although no other cemeteries are known from the other Forth islands. Long-cist burials are not, however, exclusively restricted to these areas, for there are a small number of sites in Argyll (Atkinson 2001); Sutherland (Henshall and Wallace 1960), Caithness (Edwards 1926; and 1927); Orkney (Henshall 1956); Wales (James 1992); Cornwall; Ireland; and on the Isle of Man (Thomas 1971a). Within SE Scotland, Proudfoot has pointed out that while cemeteries appear to be distributed one per parish in the Lothians (Aliaga-Kelly 1986), this is not true of Fife where, in St Andrews for instance, there are four (Proudfoot 1998).

It is probable that many more long-cist cemeteries await discovery, as they may now lie unmarked in rural locations, or lie beneath later medieval cemeteries (Proudfoot 1996). However, there is little reason to think that the main concentration seen in the SE of Scotland will be replicated elsewhere in Britain. These cemeteries are therefore a regional phenomenon, possibly associated with the conversion of the southern Picts. Smith has suggested that long-cist cemeteries and Pictish square barrows tend to be mutually exclusive, with long-cists used in the Christian SE and Pictish barrows used in the bordering pagan areas to the NW (Smith 1996, 28–9). This is not, however, the case at Thornybank, where the Pictish practice has provided a focus for the long-cist cemetery (Rees 2002).

10.2.1.3 *Abandonment/continuity*

It is known that some long-cist cemeteries, such as Hallow Hill and Catstane, went out of use in about the ninth century. Henshall has also suggested that the long-cist cemetery at Parkburn was superseded in the eighth century by a church at Lasswade, where an eighth/ninth-century carved stone Anglian cross was found (Henshall 1956, 271). The suggestion is that at this time churches or chapels were built on new sites that provided new foci for burial. It seems that the ninth century saw a change where the preferred burial rite shifted away from cist burials in favour of simple dug graves. At Whithorn and the May the tradition of burial seems to have been strong enough to survive this shift in burial practice. By the eighth-tenth centuries the May cemetery was no longer used exclusively by a monastic community, as women and children were also buried here.

10.2.1.4 *Notable burial features*

The Group 3 burials were uncisted, and so were presumably buried in dug graves. Burial 832, dated to the sixth to the seventh century, appeared not to have a cist, and there is no evidence for a shroud or a coffin. It is possible that some of these early burials may have originally had cist slabs which have been removed when the cemetery was disturbed by builders of the priory: the burial 444 beneath the Cluniac chapter house, may be an example of this. Three small fragments of carbonised woollen textile were found associated with this burial, the charring having preserved the cloth (Gabra-Sanders, Chapter 8.2.4). This material could have come from a tunic or habit, a fragment of which had been charred then used for burial. Piety continued even in death; monks were sometimes laid on sackcloth and ashes, the symbols of penance, before they died (Daniell 1996, 7). Another general feature of some of the burials is worthy of speculation here: the shell sand deposits in the long cists, along with the purposeful burning of the ground around some of the later burials (deposits of orange ash beneath the Group 4 burials), might be interpreted as ritual purification in advance of, or during, interment.

White quartz pebbles were the only artefact found in many of the graves. They were commonly associated with cist burials, and indeed were spread with great profusion over the cists in the cemetery trench. They were also occasionally found with dug graves, and so spanned the whole of the medieval period. A variation on this was seen in burial 1211, a dug grave, likely to be of 11th-century date, found within what became the later cloister. This burial was accompanied by red and blue pebbles, including one placed in the mouth, reminiscent of the painted pebbles sometimes found in Pictish contexts, for example at Jarlshof and at Portmahomack.

Elsewhere white quartz pebbles have been found in burial and ritual contexts from the Neolithic to recent

times throughout Britain and Ireland (Fiona Baker pers comm). Revelations 2:17 states that '... I will give to him a white stone, and in that stone a new name written, which no man knoweth, saving he that receiveth it.' This verse suggests that white quartz pebbles may have been considered to be a token for entry into heaven, upon which is written the new name of the blessed. Similar finds have come from medieval burials at Iona (O'Sullivan 1994, 358), and at Whithorn many white quartz and granite stones were used as grave covers in Periods I and V (Hill 1997, 472). They have also been found in graves at The Hirsell, Llandough (Thomas and Holbrook 1994 and 1996), Penmynydd, and Peel Castle, Isle of Man, along with numerous Irish examples, including Church Island, Co Kerry (O'Kelly 1958).

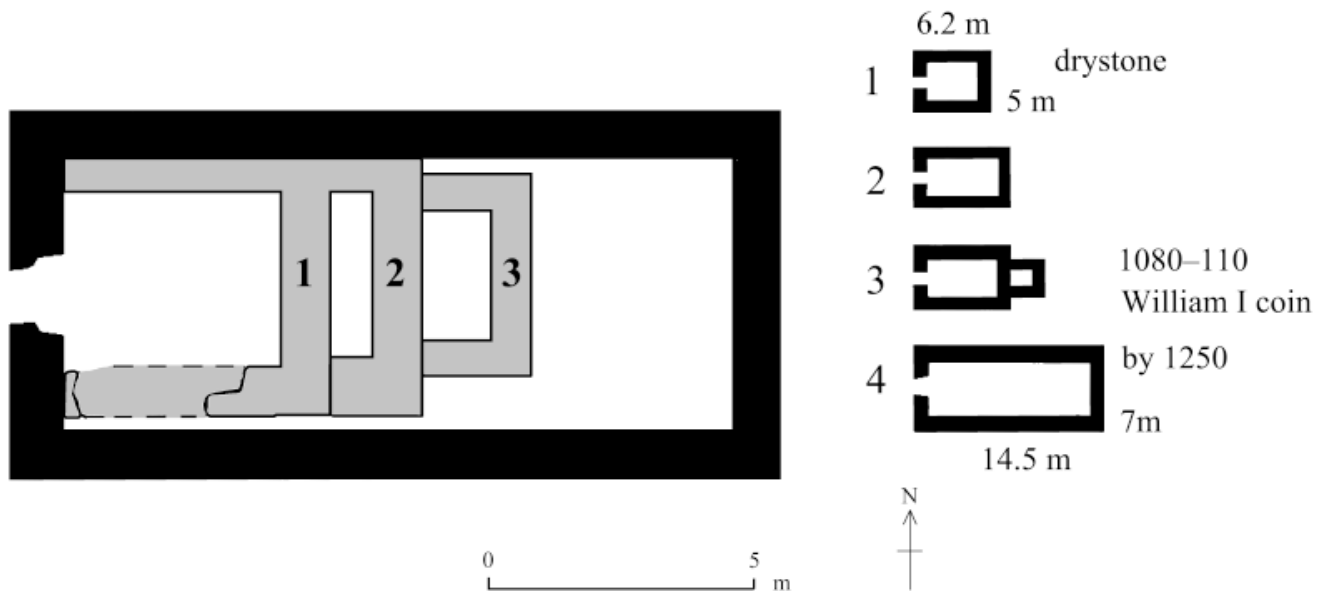
10.2.1.5 *A Viking massacre?*

Although Wyntoun's martyrdom of St Adrian [sic] on the May at the hands of the Danes in 875 can be discounted, a Danish army was active in the area at this time under the leadership of Halfdan. The earliest documented Viking raids began at the end of the eighth century with the attack on Lindisfarne in 793 and on Iona in 795. These raids developed into more sustained campaigns during the ninth century, and a religious establishment on the May would have been easy pickings, as was the case in the later medieval period. The question of whether some of the burials in the long-cist cemetery relate to a massacre in the eighth or ninth century was therefore considered and quickly discounted. If there had been a massacre, then one would expect there to be a peak in the numbers of burials at this time. There is no evidence of such a peak in numbers, but rather that deposition was gradual and continuous.

There were several cases of traumatic injury, but only three individuals might have died from wounds sustained in combat. These individuals were not found in the same parts of the cemetery and they are not precisely dated; Group 2 spans the eighth to the tenth century and Group 3 spans the seventh to the twelfth century – hardly evidence for a massacre. The presence of the late ninth-century Anglo-Saxon Burgred coin (852–74) could conceivably be regarded as evidence for the Viking raid, as Halfdan had participated in the overthrow of Burgred as king of Mercia immediately before embarking on his northern campaigns. However, Bateson considers it more likely that the coin is simply representative of Northumbrian economic influence in SE Scotland (see Bateson, Chapter 8.2.2).

10.2.2 *Early church-building*

In the late tenth century the site was cleared of vegetation in preparation for the construction of a new stone building, the first of a series of four stone churches built on the same site. Small patches of burning, containing some occupation debris and dated by the discovery of a late tenth-century coin, preceded the construction of the



Illus 10.1 Ground plans of various phases of church building.

first church. It is possible that some of this debris might represent the remains of one or more earlier timber chapels and domestic buildings. The presence of part of a single Roman *tegula* roof tile might be evidence that there was a structure on the site before the first stone church. What this tile represents, and how it came to be on the island, must remain a mystery (Hunter, Chapter 8). However, if an early chapel or church had existed on the island prior to the tenth century, it would probably have been of timber construction with a thatched roof. This is suggested by the action of Bishop Finan in the seventh century at Lindisfarne, where he built a church of hewn oak thatched with reeds ‘in the Scots manner’ (Bede, Sherley-Price 1955, 185). There is little chance of identifying the foundations of a timber structure within a stone platform, especially when the site was reused.

Fragmentary traces of a what might have been a building with stone foundations was identified as being broadly contemporary with the early phases of stone church-building. This was a short fragment of wall (895/896) found just to the W of the E revetment walls of the cemetery, and was sealed by Group 3 burials, broadly dated by radiocarbon assay to between the fifth and the eleventh century. This underscores the point that neither the early stone churches, nor the earlier timber chapels which might have preceded them, are likely to have stood in isolation.

At the end of the 11th century, Queen Margaret, wife of Malcolm III, sought to reform the Scottish Church and bring it into line with the European Church. The building of the third church with a square chancel, in the 11th century, may have been a result of this spirit of reform. Churches with a bicameral plan became one of the most widespread in northern Europe from the eighth century on, and nave and chancel

churches continued to be built throughout the Middle Ages (Cherry 1976, 160). This layout can be seen in several examples of churches in the Western Isles, Orkney, Shetland and Caithness (Fleming and Woolf 1992). Other Scottish examples are Dunfermline, Restenneth, St Rule’s in St Andrews, and St Serf’s, Loch Leven.

10.2.3 A place of healing?

The sampled population of the dead displayed a significantly higher than average level of chronic infectious diseases, along with other pathological conditions including traumatic injuries. This applies to both assemblages of burial, before and after the arrival of the Cluniac monks in the 12th century. The gender separation within the cemetery, coupled with the high dominance of males in both assemblages, indicates that these are not typical populations. This does support an interpretation of the essential character of the site during its long history as supporting a largely male, monastic population. But what about all the sick people? A reasonable explanation for this might be that some individuals and groups within the cemetery were not part of a May population, but rather had died here having first been attracted to the site for the purposes of seeking a cure. This could mean that there was a healing cult associated with St Ethernan/Adrian, which might have been combined with a monastic medical service. There is even the possibility that the island had become a place of quarantine long before the first record of it having this function in 1580, when a ship arrived ‘infected with the pest’ and was ordered to the May under pain of death, to remain there until cleansed (Eggeling 1985, 25).

10.3 Period II: medieval

10.3.1 Architecture and planning of the priory

(Illus 9.1)

Richard Fawcett

Introduction

The 12th century saw the recolonisation of the island with the establishment of a priory, a daughter house of Reading Abbey, a Benedictine community with Cluniac affiliations. A particular interest of the excavations at the May has been to see how far the layout of such a small and relatively poorly endowed foundation on a difficult site would conform to the norms of monastic planning. The only medieval structure in evidence at the start of the operations was what has proved to be the W range (RCAHMS 1933). Despite its N–S alignment, this had been widely assumed to be the church, on the assumption that the particular conditions of the site and the needs of the community had resulted in an atypical disposition of buildings. In fact, however, excavation has shown the layout of the main core of priory buildings to have been orthodox in its arrangement of four ranges around an almost square open cloister, albeit on a challengingly compressed scale. The four ranges will be described individually, starting with that on the W, and moving round the cloister in an anticlockwise direction. It must be stressed, however, that the small number of moulded or carved details that have been found makes it difficult to offer comment on either the architectural form or the dating of the structures.

The west range: prior's lodging

As already said, this was the only part of the complex of which there were above-ground structural remains before the start of the investigation. The excavations within the W range proved to be disappointing as no evidence to date its construction was forthcoming. The foundations were built over bedrock. The only remnants of the medieval flooring consisted of a patch of mortar. The range is a basically rectangular structure with rubble walls and dressed ashlar quoins and margins, and it occupies the whole of the W side of the cloister. The main primary features to survive are two windows in the N part of the W wall, and a doorway in the S wall. The windows have round-arched heads, which are externally cut through lintels, but which internally have widely splayed voussoired rear arches. The S doorway had voussoired arches both externally and internally, though much of the former is gone; the rear arch is set well above the outer arch to allow headroom for the door itself.

An intriguing primary feature of this range is an arched recess near the S end of the E wall on the face towards the cloister, which has an angled channel through the wall behind it. The N jamb of this recess has been disturbed by the insertion or remodelling of

a doorway, and it is no longer possible to be certain of its original function, though it seems likely that it was the lavatory at which the canons washed their hands before passing into the adjacent refectory in the S Range. Although lavatories were more commonly built into either the wall of the refectory itself or were set in a pavilion projecting out from the cloister arcades, there is a partial parallel for the arrangement on the Isle of May at Dryburgh Abbey, as well as at a number of English houses. Unfortunately there is insufficient evidence in any of these features to be able to allow close dating, though the turn of the 12th and 13th century is perhaps the most likely period of construction.

A number of other structures abutted this range, some of which may have been primary, while others are clearly of later date. Tusks for an offshoot of some form off the middle of the W side are still in evidence, though there was no communication between the two parts other than a rectangular window which appears to be secondary. A two-storeyed offshoot against the N wall appears to be secondary, since it partly obscures the W front of the church. It was evidently barrel-vaulted at both levels, and a drawing of 1818 by Robert Stevenson in the collections of General George Hutton shows one of those vaults as partly remaining (Illus 5.36).

The most complete surviving additions to the original structure are at its S end, and are evidently part of a 16th-century operation aimed at making the range into a self-contained secular residence. At the SE corner a small three-quarter-round tower was added, with wide-mouthed gun holes placed so as to permit enfilading fire across the S and W walls. The second addition was a domed bread oven outside the S doorway and, as part of the same operation, the doorway itself was evidently adapted as a fireplace. Throughout the rest of the building there is evidence of the insertion of a floor, in the form of pockets for joists and modifications to the arch of the northern of the two windows in the W wall to allow the insertion of an upper level of windows. The two-storey N addition seems likely to have been part of this phase of work.

These modifications were presumably carried out for Patrick Learmonth of Dairsie, who had been granted the island in 1549–50 by the Prior of Pittenweem (Stuart 1968, appendix, xcvi). Since, by analogy with monastic planning elsewhere, it seems likely the W range had originally housed the prior's lodging, it is hardly surprising that it should have been this part which lent itself most readily for occupation by its new owner.

The south range: refectory

The S range is particularly poorly preserved, and has provided less evidence for its original form than any other part of the complex. It was constructed on a rock-cut terrace at a higher level than the cloister and the E range, and had a simple mortar floor of late 13th-century date. The range extends fully along the S side of the cloister, though its NW corner overlaps the SE corner of the W range, suggesting that they were not

strictly contemporary. The range was divided into two rooms: an E room, which has a curving stone floor drain carrying waste water to the NE corner; and a W room, equipped with a similar drain which ran towards the NW corner. The drains were perhaps required to carry away surface water from the higher ground to the S and W of the range. Two doorways gave access to the S range: one from the S towards the kitchen midden; and one to the W towards the bluff. There was no surviving evidence for a doorway into the cloister.

In this position it may be assumed that the range housed the refectory, the third most important in the hierarchy of buildings after the church and the chapter house. Confirmation of this use is afforded by the existence of what has been taken to be the lavatory recess in the adjacent E wall of the W range, for the monks to wash their hands before entering the refectory through the adjacent doorway. It is uncertain whether the range was two-storeyed, and if there was a separate, external kitchen block.

The east range: chapter house, undercroft, dormitory and latrine

The E range was the most extensive of the buildings around the cloister. It was abutted by the S wall of the church, but projected further E than the church, and it extended S along the width of both the cloister and the S range, having a common wall with the S range. However, it clearly then extended further S in some form for a considerable distance, beyond a cross wall, since what appears to have been the latrine block projects well to the S and E.

Our understanding of the planning of the main body of the range has been confused by the insertion of later walls on the W side towards the cloister, which were inset from the original line of the W wall. It is clear, however, that the surviving part was initially divided into no more than two parts, with a smaller rectangular chamber which can be identified as the chapter house immediately next to the church, and a much longer space to the S. The chapter house had traces of benches along two walls. A number of faceted shafts, found here in demolition debris, suggests that the benches were surmounted by blind arcading (see Chapter 8.4.4). That this range should have been of such a simple plan is one of the clearest pointers to the modest architectural aspirations of the community on the Isle of May.

In a larger house, in addition to the chapter house, the ground floor of the range might have been expected to house the night and day stairs to the dormitory, a sacristy, a parlour or slype, a day room and a warming house. Some of these functional spaces could in fact have been formed in the undercroft by the insertion of timber partitions, while others may have been located in the range to the S, which was not investigated. The floor level at the S end of this range was considerably higher than that towards the chapter house end, itself pointing to the likely presence of a lost timber partition on an E–W alignment. A mortared base within the cloister

immediately W of the chapter house could have been the platform for an external stair to and from the dormitory on the upper floor.

Within the long undercroft space, the most striking surviving features were two bases for cylindrical piers, the intercolumniation of which suggests there was space for a third, lost pier, to the S. The two bases differ slightly in form, but both are essentially of water-holding type, with one having a more fully rounded lower torus moulding than the other. Although there was archaeological evidence suggesting that the bases were secondary insertions, they are unlikely to be of different dates. Indeed, there can often be architectural variations within single building operations. At Arbroath Abbey, for example, there is considerable variety in the base types at what was one of Scotland's most prestigious building schemes of the late 12th and early 13th centuries. The bases on the Isle of May seem most likely to date from the first decades of the 13th century, and may therefore have replaced an earlier provision of timber posts. The piers carried by these bases would have supported the floor of the dormitory on the upper storey of the E range. In most religious houses, stone vaulting covered the ground floor of the conventual ranges, but there was no evidence that there was vaulting in this range, just as there was clearly none in the more complete W range. In view of this, it seems likely that the piers of the E range either supported a series of arches on which the floor rested in turn, or they supported a principal longitudinal joist, which then supported the floor joists.

The location of the dormitory above the E range is corroborated by the partial survival of the latrine block to the SE of the range. The latrines themselves would have been on the same level as the dormitory, and the chief evidence for them is the lower part of four wide arches at ground level. In this arrangement there are similarities with the latrine on another Forth island site, at Inchcolm (RCAHMS 1933, 8), where the sea evidently washed out the area within the latrine arches. On the Isle of May, however, the arches opened onto a sewer trench with a steep natural fall to the E.

The north range: the church

There was evidence for at least three phases of construction within the priory, even within its short lifespan from the mid-12th century to the early 14th century. Initially, the monks presumably used the existing 11th-century church, in the period when the priory buildings were under construction. This church was of two-compartment plan, with a distinct and narrower chancel that had a well-formed, almost cubical, SE quoin. But in the 13th century a new church was built, which was dedicated to All Saints.

In this final phase an aisle-less, rectangular plan was again adopted and, although it was built on a more ambitious scale than any of its predecessors, it was little larger than the W range. There was no evidence for a stone-built division between the chancel and nave,

although it may be assumed that the two were separated by a timber screen of some kind. The church could be expected to contain a number of altars; the documentary records contain references to the chapel or altar of St Ethernan, as well as to the chapel of St Mary the Virgin (Stuart 1868, liv).

The church fully abutted the N end of the E range. It did not extend to the full width of the W range, perhaps pointing to an intention to build a lean-to western narthex. Space was also left for a corridor between the church and the W range. The only *in situ* architectural feature was the W door; this had internally splayed jambs, but the outer part was so severely plain, with simple right-angled arrises, that it seems a possibility it was a later insertion. The sole clue to any architectural enrichment of the church was an arch stone, found reused in one of the post-medieval cross-walls of the workshop that was built out of the ruins of the church. Although heavily weathered, this stone had three orders of rolls separated by deep hollows, indicative of a date in the 13th century. If this stone originated in the church, it suggests that, despite its simple plan, the church may have had at least one finely detailed doorway or window in its original form.

The floor of the church was lost as a result of later activity, although large quantities of plain ceramic floor tiles were found *ex situ* across the site. The wall foundations were considerably thicker at the E end with buttressing at the NE corner, which must have been a necessary response to structural problems resulting from the proximity of the slope edge and the instability of the reveted cemetery beneath. No evidence was found of any altars, sculpture, painted finishes, or furnishings. Fragments of white plaster were seen on the inside of the N wall, however, and a possible plaster leaf was found that might have come from a statue or a frieze (Figure 8.7, no 60). Several sherds of medieval window glass were found within demolition debris just outside the W wall, which suggests the existence of a leaded window in this wall. Roofing materials, in the form of large ceramic tiles, were also found.

Parallels for the planning of the priory

There are many uncertainties about the planning of the priory on the Isle of May. The chronological interrelationship of the four main buildings is far from clear, though the way in which the refectory and W range abut each other indicates they are not coeval, and the same is true of the relationship between the E range and the church. The circulation within the cloister is also unclear. There is no certainty as to the location of the doorways from the buildings into the cloister, and neither is it known if there were covered walks around the four sides of the garth. On the latter point, however, there is evidence of a path along the W side and, although what is now seen probably dates from the period of the conversion of the W range into a residence for the Learmonth family, it possibly perpetuates an earlier walkway.

Making due allowances for these uncertainties, what is most striking about the planning of the priory on the Isle of May is the way in which it was composed of a series of rectangular blocks disposed around the almost square cloister. This must have created a strongly quadrangular appearance, albeit with some outlying buildings extending beyond the main core. Specific inspiration for such an arrangement could hardly be sought in the major houses of monks and canons where, although the cloister was similarly at the heart of the plan, the constituent buildings were usually far more complex. Unfortunately, however, we currently know so little about the planning of smaller houses in Scotland that we cannot be sure if there were immediate prototypes for the arrangements on the Isle of May. Nevertheless, when we look at those few smaller houses of which the plans are known, it seems likely that what we see both on the Isle of May and elsewhere resulted from a general reluctance to depart from an approach to claustral planning that had held sway in Western Christendom since at least the early ninth century, and that seems to have been regarded as an essential basis for a properly regulated monastic life.

In smaller houses the relationship between the buildings may be relatively loose, as on the Isle of May and in the buildings N of the church on the Brough of Birsay (which was possibly but not certainly monastic) (RCAHMS 1946, 2), or they may be more strictly interrelated as at Oronsay Priory (Augustinian) (RCAHMS 1984, 2), Peebles Friary (Trinitarian) (RCAHMS 1967, 205), or Iona Nunnery (Augustinian) (RCAHMS 1982, 154). But, despite the wide date range of the buildings at these foundations, varying from the 12th to the 16th century, there is a significant commonality of approach to planning. Also, as on the Isle of May, the E ranges of these houses are generally less structurally subdivided than those of their larger counterparts. The investigations on the Isle of May are thus of high importance for the further light they cast on our limited understanding of such small-scale monastic houses.

It should be added that the number of monks in the community on the Isle of May was always small, possibly reaching a high-point of 13 during the reign of William the Lion in the early 13th century (Duncan 1959, 60). Those few artefacts that were recovered did cast some light on the domestic, industrial and ecclesiastical activities of such a community. These activities are likely to have included the copying of texts in a scriptorium, although the location of this room is unknown.

10.3.2 The scallop shell burial

Only three burials were found within the priory church. Two adult male skeletons lay parallel with each other near the NW corner, one of which was radiocarbon dated to between the mid-13th and the late 14th century. Towards the E end of the church a third burial of an

adult male was found, likely to have died in his twenties, which proved to be the most vivid discovery of the project. This burial (context 155) was found under the floor of the church, axially in front of where the high altar is likely to have stood. To have been buried in this favoured location indicates firstly that the deceased held a position of importance in or to the monastery, and secondly that the burial took place while the altar and the roof were still intact. According to the radiocarbon assay, he died sometime between the early 14th and the early 15th century (GU-4962). Our tentative understanding of how the church decayed, and indeed was probably demolished not long after 1300, would put this burial at the lower end of this bracket. What made this so exceptional was that shortly after he died the upper valve of a scallop shell (species *Pecten maximus* L, Dr W Penrice, Fife Nature, pers comm) had been placed in his mouth.

The scallop was the widely recognised badge of pilgrims to the shrine of the apostle St James the Greater at Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, NW Spain (Yeoman 1999, 115). From the 12th century on, this shrine was attracting huge numbers of pilgrims. By the later medieval period the scallop was adopted as the universal symbol of pilgrimage. As well as identifying the wearer as a pious pilgrim, the badges were much valued as possessing sacred and talismanic powers, especially when obtained at the shrine then carried home. Originally, natural shells were favoured, although, by the 13th-century, cast, base metal badges gained in popularity. The only example of the latter from Scotland is also from Fife, in this case a small gilded badge found by a metal detectorist near St Monans (Yeoman 1999, 118).

A considerable number of burials of pilgrims have been found across western Europe accompanied by natural scallop shells (Santiago de Compostela Exhibition Catalogue 1985, 291–3). There is at least one burial, probably of late 12th-century date, excavated within the basilica of Santiago itself, found to the N of the crossing. This contained a scallop shell with a characteristic pair of perforations at the bulbous top, for attachment to clothing. Excavations in the old village of Schleswig, Germany, produced 11 burials, each with a shell, dated to the late 11th to the 14th century. Another German example, from the late 12th century, was found within the church of St Dionysius, Esslingen. Disturbed graves here produced 25 shells, all perforated for attachment. One intact burial was found with a pair of perforated shells on the breast. At Keynsham Abbey in Bristol, a painted and perforated shell was found with a burial c1200. A burial was found at Fishergate, York, with a scallop at hip level: this woman may have been buried wearing her characteristic pilgrim's satchel, or scrip (Cecily Spall pers comm). Pierced natural scallop pilgrims' badges are also found in domestic contexts, including one from Lower Brook Street, Winchester, and another from High Street, Perth, both in 13th-century contexts (Yeoman 1999, 118). More than 200 such

pierced shells have been found in medieval contexts across western Europe, 90 per cent of them from burials (Lubin 1990, 22).

The burial of a fully clothed and booted male pilgrim, who had died around 1500, was found in the crossing at Worcester Cathedral (Lubin 1990). A pierced cockleshell, rather than a scallop, was found near the right shoulder. Although smaller than the scallops, the overall appearance of this bivalve is similar and pilgrims used both. The most common species of scallop found in pilgrim contexts is the convex valve of *Pecten maximus* L (just like the Shell petrol sign), and sometimes *Pecten jacobaeus* (for example, the Fishergate find). The former species, the great scallop, occurs along the European Atlantic coast from northern Norway to the Iberian peninsula. It rarely occurs on the E coast of the UK, although it has been found on the Berwickshire coast. This is the true shell of St James, as displayed by Santiago pilgrims. This was such a universal symbol, however, that the shells were worn by many and not necessarily obtained at the shrine.

But what was the purpose of sending the man buried in front of the altar in the May priory on his final journey, bearing his pilgrim's badge wedged tight in his mouth? Had he been an actual or a symbolic pilgrim? The action of wedging his jaw with a sheep bone and then placing the shell in his mouth seems deliberate and purposeful. No other comparable burial accompanied by a scallop shell has come to light. It was clearly the intention of those preparing the burial that the deceased should present himself to St Peter at the time of a fleshy resurrection on the Day of Judgement, as they believed, bearing the shell of the pious pilgrim protruding from his mouth, almost like a consecrated host. We will never know whether he had made the arduous journey to Santiago and returned with his prized scallop from the basilica, although the rarity of this species on the E coast does increase this possibility.

10.3.3 Other priory structures

No infirmary could be identified on the May although such a structure would be expected, and could possibly be the building glimpsed to the S of the S range, which probably shared the latrine with the dormitory. A small infirmary for the care of the old and sick monks might also have catered for secular visitors seeking cures. Remains of a wide variety of wild plants, including those with notable medicinal properties such as henbane and greater celandine, were found within the open hearths in the E range. It is quite possible that these plants were used by the monks, and in the case of the rare henbane, could have been introduced to the island by them. Knowledge of the medicinal properties of these plants, and use of them, was well known in the medieval period. An alternative would be to suggest this range as the prior's lodging (R Fawcett pers comm). For his lodging to link with the latrine this would allow the prior to preserve the letter of the idea of communal

living. If an ancillary range did stand here, then a courtyard would have been created, about 8m N–S, between this range and the refectory to the N.

A small corner of an external range was uncovered to the NW of the church. It may have been a later addition to the priory facilities, serving some unknown domestic (guest-house?) or industrial use. A stone-built drain followed the outside of its N wall for a short distance after which it was constructed in reused ceramic roof tiles. It appears that it was only designed to take water a short distance from the structure allowing it to soak away. This drain sealed the earlier graves.

10.3.4 The later medieval cemetery

Few burials were found that were contemporary with the life of the priory. These respected the older graves, which must still have been marked, and consisted of one group close into the church, and another beyond the cisted burials to the far N limit of the cemetery. Group 4 was found close to the N wall of the church, stratigraphically earlier than the NW range. These burials were radiocarbon dated to the early 11th to the mid-13th century, and so may have spanned the Cluniac colonisation. Burial methods within this group varied as dug graves, partial cists and a deeply buried cist (1033) were all found. The burials included two females and a child, although the predominance of males continued. The woman buried within the deep cist (1033) may have been an important individual to warrant having her grave marked with such a massive orientated stone, reminiscent in shape and size to a hogback. A similarly marked grave existed just to the S, but was not excavated. This group of burials cut through the road (883), which is significant as in the earlier period the road demarcated the W limit of the cemetery and was respected by all burials. Perhaps the abandonment of the road reflects a change to the layout of the site, which saw access to the priory shift from the NW to its present position up the hill from the harbour below to the E.

Forty-seven coffin nails were identified from deposits within this period, although only five of these were found in close association with burials. This reflects the disturbance during the construction of the priory in the 12th and 13th centuries. The disturbance this caused to the graves, in the areas that became the cloister and E range was graphically seen when these areas were excavated, as they were found to contain large amounts of stray human bone. Some remains were carefully reburied, however, with one ossuary pit found under the S wall of the church, while a burial of disarticulated bones (924) was found in Group 4. The quantity of stray human bone found in the cloister must have meant that the later monks were crunching the remains of their predecessors under their sandals.

The latest medieval burials were found furthest N in the cemetery. Two burials in Trench V, to the NE of the Group 1 long cists, were on a similar SW–NE alignment as the earlier long cists, but these two were dug graves and one had a radiocarbon date of the 13th century.

Each grave contained two nails, indicating the presence of coffins. The male was particularly robust, and the skeletal analyses suggest that he may have been an oarsman (Battley and Roberts, Section 6). The remains of a low bank of stones in Trench L, dated to at least the 12th century or later, are interpreted as marking the N boundary of the later cemetery enclosure.

10.3.5 Abandonment, destruction and decay

The open hearths and demolition debris within the E range, coupled with the layer of debris found within the latrine, testify to the abandonment and destruction of the priory in the late 13th or early 14th century. Elsewhere the archaeological evidence for the abandonment was quite limited, due to the reuse of the other ranges in the post-medieval period. One of the open hearths in the E Range contained a sherd of window glass and lead waste, which suggests that little time was lost in removing valuable lead windows and water pipes. The macroplant material recovered from the hearth (oak, hazel, willow and birch charcoal, along with a wide variety of carbonised seeds, including chaff and weed seeds) suggests that the hearths were fuelled with locally grown plants augmented by structural timber from the dismantling of buildings, hence the presence of oak. We cannot be certain of what is represented by this activity: it could be the campfires of demolition teams and stone robbers, or else the bivouacs of naval patrols.

The documentary evidence for the abandonment of the island in favour of the priory at Pittenweem when the priory was caught in the crossfire of the Wars of Independence is discussed above (Chapter 2). During later years, when a single hermit remained on the island, it is likely that the site was stripped of any remaining valuables. Any relics of the saint, not already removed to Pittenweem were perhaps moved into the W range. The W range could also have provided suitable accommodation for the pilgrims who still visited the shrine. In 1550 the island was feued out of ecclesiastical ownership by John Roull (styled Prior of Pittenweem) to Patrick Learmonth, one-time provost of St Andrews. At this time it was recorded that a chaplain was to continue 'divine service out of reverence to the relics and sepulchres of the saints resting in the island'. By then the island was described as a 'waste' and spoiled by the rabbits that had been released from the warrens (Stuart 1868, xl).

10.4 Period III: post-medieval (Illus 9.2)

This period saw the remodelling of the derelict and part-demolished priory buildings during the 16th to the 18th century, followed by the landscaping of the site in the 19th and 20th centuries. This latter phase included demolition work and construction of field walls carried out by the Commissioners for Northern Lights in the 19th century. This was followed in turn by 20th-century wartime occupation, and finally by the of the Bird Observatory.



Illus 10.1 *Christening of baby daughter of naval commander in 1945 in St Adrian's Chapel (west range). Note the large naval accommodation buildings to the north. (Copyright R Morris)*

This excavation adds to the understanding of the conversion of monastic buildings to secular lordly use. The island was brought into secular ownership by the mid-16th century, and passed through several hands in the following decades. One of these owners was responsible for the conversion of the priory into a laird's residence with an enclosed courtyard barmkin, probably occupied on a seasonal basis. This rebuilding included the addition of a vaulted north annexe, a closet/gun tower and bread oven to the W range, the conversion of part of the church to a smithy, and the rebuilding of the far SE range adjacent to the monastic latrine. The line of the old slype entrance through the derelict E range seems to have been maintained, and protected by a gatehouse created out of the shell of the old chapter house. The W range might have been roofed with large stone roof slates, which might have been brought in specially or might have been available stockpiled from the demolition of the priory (Chapter 8.6.4). The variety of Continental imported pottery found, likely to be associated with 16th–17th-century use of the laird's house, indicates that a fairly good lifestyle was enjoyed here, if the tableware and drinking vessels are anything to go by. This household had access to supplies of dishes, jugs, flasks, kitchen pots, bowls and olive jars from northern France, the Loire, Bordeaux, the Low Countries, northern Germany, Portugal and Spain. Sadly, we shall never know whether or not the Seville jars still contained their olives or olive oil when they were landed on the May.

The latest burial in trench V could date from this period, although it seems more likely that burial here stopped altogether at the Reformation. A post-medieval burial ground was created 400m to the NW on the South Plateau with a single surviving gravestone to the last villager, John Wishart, dated 1730 (Eggeling 1985, 27). This is supposed to have served the village that was established on the island, the site of which was sought in these excavations, but not found. It is likely that the houses were of turf and driftwood, leaving little trace. Subsequent cultivation could also have contributed to its destruction.

19th-century lighthouse

Robert Stevenson built a new lighthouse on the May in 1816. *The New Statistical Account of Scotland* 1845 describes how 'besides the lighthouses there are comfortable lodgings for the keepers and their families, and excellent accommodation for the Commissioners when they visit the island. The only inhabitants are the persons connected with the lighthouses; but there are generally also a number of pilots from various quarters looking out for ships, and the old light tower is fitted up for their accommodation' (NSA 1845, 944).

Stevenson's plan of 1818 depicts only the W range of the priory, and describes this as 'the remains of the ancient building' (Nat Lib Scot MS 30.5.23.21), which suggests that the other ranges were demolished by this time. This was evidently enough time for the outer

buildings to have been removed and much of the stone used in the field walls (see Illus 1.3). Perhaps it was only the W range which was recognised as being 'ancient' because of the retained lancet windows and association with the saint, while the other ranges were thought to be no more than post-medieval outbuildings and therefore suitable for quarrying. A roughly square area around the W Range was retained as part of a system of enclosures, which extended along the terrace to the S. This was an element of the 10 acre farm created by the Commissioners in 1814 for use by the lighthouse keepers. It was clear from the absence of a large quantity of rubble, that much of the stone from the priory and post-monastic walls had been removed from the site rather than allowed to collapse *in situ*.

It is interesting to note that the fine dressed stone of the Lighthouse Commissioners' houses and workshops

is similar to that of the characteristic cream-coloured sandstone dressings of the priory. Some may have been robbed, plus they are likely to have imported more of the same stone from the Craighead Quarry at Fife Ness, as used by the monks. Indeed, Stevenson is known to have operated a harbour here for lighthouse building activity. The priory rubble would have been ideal for the construction of the field walls. The monastic site seems to have been respected by the naval complements stationed on the island in both World Wars. Evocative photos have survived from 1945, when the naval commander returned after the end of World War II to have his baby daughter christened in a service held in the ruins of the W range, then known as St Adrian's Chapel, witnessed by the full naval complement. And blessed by the saint, no doubt (Illus 9.3).