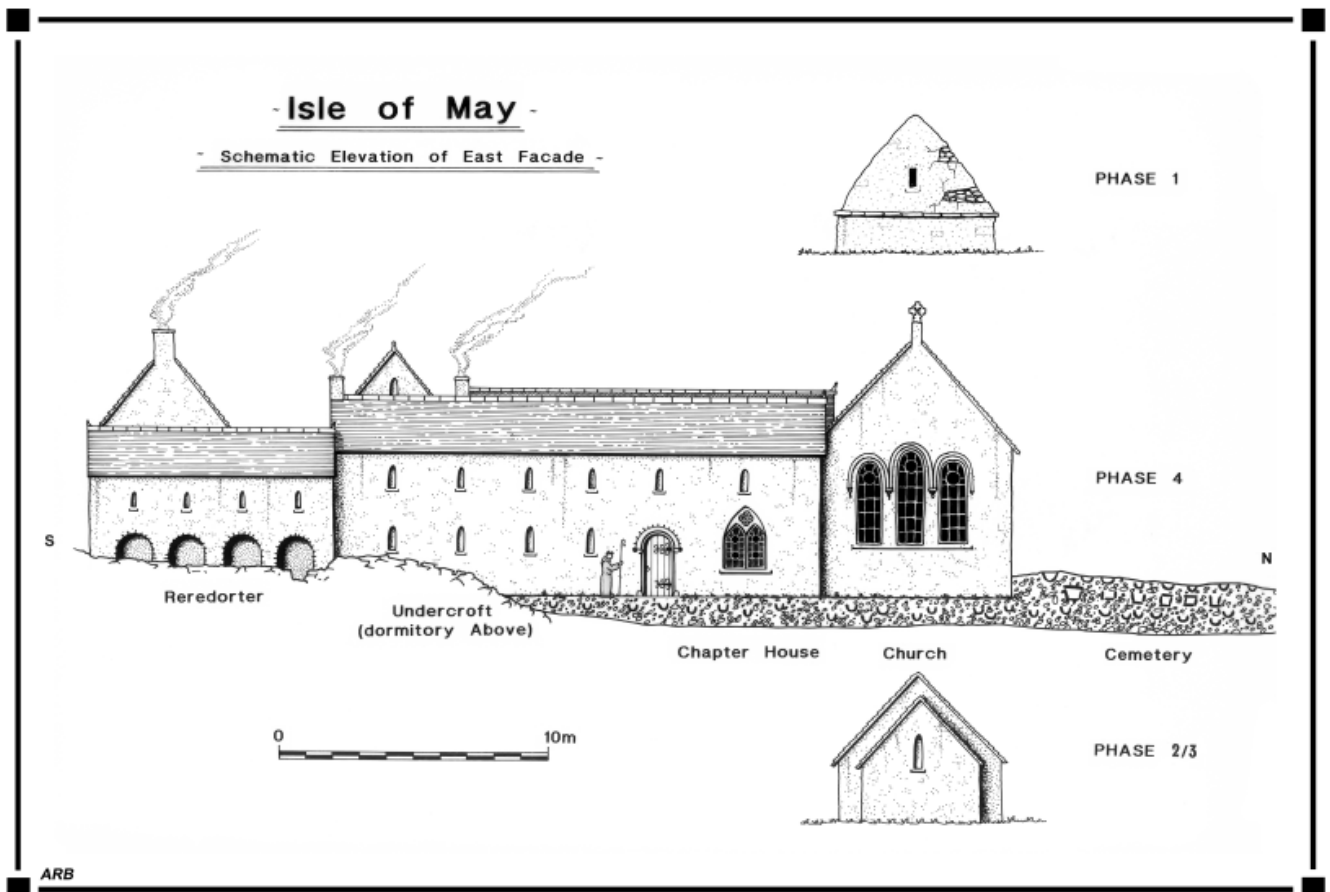




Illus 9.1 Reconstruction drawing of the E elevation of the priory.
(Drawn by Alan Braby. © Fife Council and Historic Scotland)

9 Comparative results from recent investigations of Early Christian churches and monasteries in Pictland and Alba

The results of the excavations on the May can now be considered in the context of significant advances in historical and archaeological study of the Early Christian period, that is, from the time of the extensive acceptance of the Christian faith, up to the creation of the parish system and the introduction of European reformed monastic orders in the later 11th and early 12th centuries. For a wider discussion of this subject *see* Foster 2004.

Although we cannot be certain, it is likely that large Christian populations existed possibly as early as the fifth century – people who had to have baptismal, sacramental, funereal, and ultimately intercessionary liturgies throughout their lives. These rituals could only be performed by priests, who needed to celebrate mass several times a day at altars in churches and chapels, and who required to be buried close to those same altars.

Numerous possible early church sites have been identified in the West Highlands and Islands, for example in the RCAHMS Argyll volumes where, amongst the multitude of small oblong structures in enclosed burial grounds, are likely to be lurking pre-12th-century proto-parochial churches. These sites are harder to find elsewhere in Scotland. Nevertheless, there is a similar strong likelihood that some of the hundreds of later parish churches and chapels were built to replace older churches on the same sites. Some of these were subsequently abandoned at the Reformation to become family burial places, making it unusual, and indeed often impossible, for these to become available for investigation.

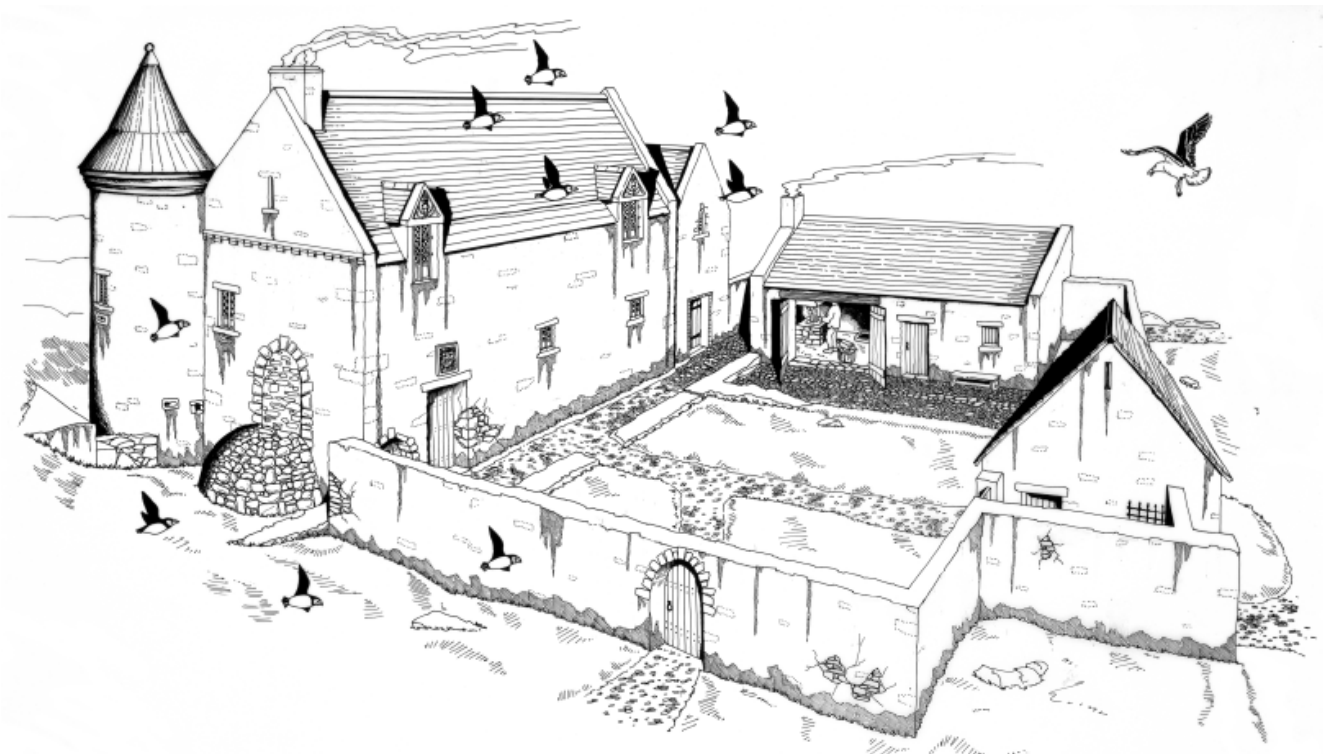
On Iona the archaeological reality of Columba's monastery has been obscured by a romantic veil which O'Sullivan has expertly parted (O'Sullivan 1998). We are seduced by the sweet airs and heavenly breezes into perceiving some kind of authentic Early Christian contact when visiting Iona rather than reflecting some kind of archaeological reality. This simply reflects the packaging of the 'Columban experience', repeated since the time of Abbot Adomnan in the later seventh century, and repeated once again by the Benedictines when they transformed the site to their use in 13th century.

O'Sullivan has demonstrated how dozens of piecemeal interventions within the monastic enclosure have eroded the resource, while offering little understanding in return. The exception to this was Barber's larger scale excavations, which revealed a large circular timber building 20m in diameter – the great house, or the pig house, depending on which interpretation you follow (Barber 1982). We can only speculate on how the churches at Iona would have looked, although Adomnan makes

passing reference to timbers for church building being taken to Iona. Following the evidence from Ireland it seems clear that stone church building was a rare occurrence in the 10th century, only becoming common with the introduction of Romanesque architecture in the 12th century. This would seem to underline the significance of the May in having an early stone-built church.

The surviving structure of the later medieval church of Iona offers few clues, but does repay close examination. Two structures do hint at early origins. Firstly, St Columba's shrine, located at the NW corner of the Benedictine church, which had served as a significant focus for high crosses and other monuments, was a later rebuilding of a tiny chapel built sometime between the 10th and the 12th century, which might have enclosed Columba's original grave (RCAHMS 1982, 2). Secondly, traces of earlier churches were found beneath the nave by Macgregor Chalmers in his early 20th-century, poorly recorded excavations (RCAHMS 1982, 152 and note 275), together with early burials containing white quartz pebbles, a common and sometimes ubiquitous token found in early Christian burials in Scotland, including those found on the May (this volume p 176). The 13th-century crypt under the E end was probably formed from elements of an older church. It is therefore possible to suggest that the Benedictines were constrained in their church planning by these two sanctified fixed points, at E and W. These existing structural components imbued, as they believed, with the spirit of the saint may have predetermined the planning of their church. So the evidence from Iona is fugitive to say the least, and therefore attention must be directed to the few excavated sites which have produced good evidence in order to gain insights into how Iona might have looked.

St Ronan's, the later medieval parish church of Iona, is located about 700m S of the monastery. When excavated, this was found to overly a hitherto unknown satellite chapel of the early monastery, one of a considerable number which co-existed within this liturgical landscape (Yeoman 1999, 79). When this was excavated, the earliest Christian graves were found to have been overlain by the remains of small unicameral stone building, internally 4.5m E–W by 3.3m N–S, with clay-bonded walls rendered with lime mortar. It had a single door in the W end, similar to the first stone church on the May. The excavator has proposed that the roof was thatched (O'Sullivan 1994). The E end remained constant, while later rebuilding extended the church to the W, probably during the 12th century – the opposite of how the May church developed.



Illus 9.2 Reconstruction drawing of the laird's house, barmkin, and smithy. (© Fife Council and Historic Scotland)

Inchmarnock, a small island of the W coast of Isle of Bute, in the Firth of Clyde, is one of a number of later medieval churches where finds of early sculpture provide strong evidence of an Early Christian origin. Recent excavations here have identified an early monastic site, which was probably under the control of St Blane's, the larger monastery on the Bute mainland. The latter may have been part of the Columban family, established in the sixth century.

The site at Inchmarnock consists of a large oval enclosure, close to the beach, within which is a late 12th-century stone church. Whereas at the May, outbuildings of an early monastery were not found in the excavated area, these were found at Inchmarnock, notably workshops identified as a monastic 'craft-zone' of the eighth to ninth century, within 20m N and W of the church site and connected to it by paved surfaces. As is often the case, it was not possible to investigate beneath the later church without damaging it, although hints of an earlier church were found here along with early burials to the N of the later church. The bones did not survive, and so these are undated. The evidence of the carved stones from the site can now be coupled with an extraordinarily rich archaeological assemblage of hundreds of fragments of stone slates. These were inscribed with decorative patterns, figurative scenes, and writing, dated to the eighth to ninth centuries. One slate seems to record a slave raiding party, while another depicts a section of an arcaded basilican church with three orders of stone architecture, likely to have been copied from a manuscript in this monastery's library. Another has two lines of identical Latin text in insular miniscule – the exemplum

of the master along with the copy of the pupil (Connolly 2002–3). These must surely be the abandoned leaves of notebooks and sketchbooks of scribes, teachers, and craftsmen, and are all the more extraordinary for having survived at an apparently minor monastery. This evidence of scholarship, teaching and literacy clearly supports a monastic interpretation for this site.

Portmahomack, on the Tarbat peninsula of Easter Ross, has produced the greatest and most complete evidence of an early monastery to date. Large parts of the enclosure to the SW of the standing post-Reformation hilltop church, have been excavated by Martin Carver since the mid-1990s. Workshops, a mill, millpond and a kiln barn have been found, dated to the sixth to ninth century. Excavations of the early cemetery in and around the later church revealed the graves of predominantly old men. This is identified as a Pictish monastery with Columban affinities. The monastery appears to have been expanded in the eighth century. The craft-zone area is remarkably well preserved, with deep, stratified deposits, reminiscent of the best Later medieval urban sites. This existed to either side of a paved and kerbed road way, with what was undoubtedly a vellum-making workshop on the W side. The workshop buildings were of wattle-and-daub construction. In the ninth century the entire complex suffered cataclysmic destruction, possibly by raiders, at which time Pictish sculpture was smashed and thrown into the roadside boundary ditch (Carver 1995–2004).

The standing church is likely to occupy the site where the monastic church stood. This building has remained in almost constant use, arguably since the primary

colonisation in the sixth century when the first timber church was built, and has been rebuilt in a number of forms to meet the changing demands of liturgy. Consequently, as at Iona, it is challenging to say the least to decipher any early fabric or plan. However, there is an important clue in the different alignment and build of the E end wall of what is now the crypt.

A crypt on a site with saintly associations and Early Christian origins is a strong candidate to be part of an early structure, elements of which were eagerly retained and conserved by successive generations. Examples of this can be seen at Iona, Glasgow and Whithorn – all important reliquary churches (Yeoman 1999, 84). At each of these places, when enlargement to the W took place, pre-existing, ground-level structures became crypts. In each case, a slope up to the W, combined with a steadily accreting ground surface (in part due to intensive burial activity), meant that enlargement to the W had to be at a higher level. This offered the attractive opportunity to develop a two-storey E end, with the high altar above and a crypt below, usually focused on the empty tomb of the saint, or else a later shrine. In all cases, major elements of the older fabric were retained, albeit extensively rebuilt and strengthened, and fully articulated with the church, which was then free to grow ever-westwards. This argues against the excavator's original model of a new, free-standing church being built to the W, eventually being joined to the remains of the crypt by a chancel.

It is important to bear in mind that this tentative fragment of an early stone church at Portmahomack, following the model proposed here that stone church building is rare before the tenth century, is likely to be a later refoundation, as on the May. This could represent a new endowment by a patron, with cash, lands, and maybe even masons' service, consciously removing what went before. It may well have followed the earlier devastation of the site.

At Forteviot in Perthshire, there is clear architectural evidence of a ninth-century stone church, albeit a single, dislocated fragment. Forteviot was the site of a Pictish royal residence, said to have been where Kenneth mac Alpin died in 858, the first king of both Picts and Scots. Forteviot is close to an important concentration of power centres in S Pictland, overlooked by the Dupplin Cross, with the fort at Moncrieffe Hill, and the early royal centres of Abernethy and Scone all close by. This arch was found around 1832 in the stream beside the hill where the later church now stands. Although it dates from a time when buildings were normally of timber, it must have come from a substantial stone building. The defaced front has a cross (with what looks like poor attempts to represent interlace or woodgrain) in the centre and beside it an animal, probably intended to be a paschal lamb (symbol of Christ). On the right and left are men with long moustaches holding staffs; those on the right are cowed (Close-Brooks and Stevenson 1982, 40). This arch is certainly from a stone and mortar church, and can be ascribed a ninth-century date. It is likely to either be from an external door through a

tower-porch, or else from an internal division, such as a chancel arch. Could this be from a refoundation ordered by King Kenneth, when a new stone church was built next to his palace?

At Dull, Perthshire, recent excavations have highlighted the potential for early ecclesiastical remains to be found beneath Later medieval and post-Reformation churches, on the rare occasions when these are available for investigation (Will *et al* 2005). This site has produced a good number of early carved stones, and is referred to in a 12th-century document as an *urbs*, interpreted as a monastic settlement. An early eighth-century inscribed slab, of a kind only seen at Iona, was found under the floor of the church. This was close to a N-S clay-bonded wall of an earlier, undated church. This was on a slightly different alignment to that of the standing church.

St Andrews was the site of another Pictish palace and royal church/monastery, sited on the headland known as Kilrimonth. This was well established by the time of the death of earliest named abbot, recorded in the Annals of Ulster in 747. Multiple churches were standing here by the time the Augustinians arrived in the mid-12th century. The early churches are now only represented by the cemeteries that grew up around them, containing long-cist graves, at Kirkhill, St Peter's and St Leonard's. At least one piece amongst the large collection of early sculpture, the so-called St Andrew's sarcophagus, stood within one of the early churches here (Foster 2004, 95). This triumph of Pictish stone carving, created in the later eighth century, is likely to have contained the remains of a Pictish royal saint. It probably stood within a church next to the altar, the strong relief carved figures designed to be seen by the worshippers.

Some of the best evidence of early burial practice, together with the only remains of a possible timber chapel, was found just outside St Andrews at Hallow Hill. The site is identified with the *Eglisnamin* place name – meaning – 'the Holy Church', and occupies a prominent hilltop location. One hundred and fifty mainly cisted graves were excavated, out of an estimated total of about 500, and were dated to the fifth to the ninth century with a floruit in the seventh century. This unenclosed cemetery was laid out in clusters of rows, which the excavator suggests were family groupings. It was laid out to either side of a metalled road, which appeared to run towards the Kilrimonth headland, 2.5km to the NE. The cists were neatly built with slabs brought from the shore. The excavator found the six-post outline of a timber building, 7m by 3m and orientated E-W, identified as a possible mortuary chapel. This was peripheral to the W side of the cemetery, indicative of it having been built after the cemetery was well established. It has been suggested that we should expect to find such churches or chapels in Christian cemeteries, for funeral liturgies, and for commemorative or intercessory prayers. The cemetery was abandoned after the ninth century, possibly after its role as a favoured burial location was taken over by St Andrews itself.

