



SCOTLAND IN EARLY MEDIEVAL EUROPE

edited by
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'A bright crowd of chancels': whither early church archaeology in Scotland?

Sally M Foster

He brings northward to meet the Lord a bright crowd of chancels – Colum
Cille, kirks for hundreds, widespread candle

2.1 Introduction

From this opening verse of Thomas Clancy's translation of *Tiurgraind Beccáin* ('The Last Verses of Beccán'), a poet, hermit and saint associated with Rum, Iona and the Hebrides (d AD 677), we learn of the perceived extent of St Columba's influence in promoting Christian beliefs and converting people beyond his monastic base on Iona (Clancy and Márkus 1995, 147, 156). Today we acknowledge that a change of belief need not immediately correlate with Christianisation – a change in ritual practices – and that the lived experience of religion might often involve just small-scale and repetitive actions quite difficult for archaeologists to detect in most contexts, which extend technically anywhere (see Petts 2011). We struggle to recognise whether some structures associated with early burial places *are* actually early churches. Indeed, we appreciate that for the majority of people, the earliest Christian worship could have taken place in the home, and that prior to the eighth century burials rarely took place in a church graveyard (see for example, O'Brien 2003; Maldonado 2011; 2013). Yet, written while Iona was energetically developing the cult of Columba, this seventh-century poem with its reference to 'chancels' reminds us how the presence of churches was, and still is, an important index of the spread, nature and broad impact of Christianity in Early Medieval Scotland. This paper offers a brief commentary on the present state of play with early church archaeology in Scotland, some of the issues, and the rationale for a future approach that on the one hand puts Scottish church archaeology on the European stage while at the same time responding to and celebrating its diversity and local idiosyncrasies.

2.2 Current state of early church archaeology in Scotland

Although they both focus on materialised ideology (cf de Marrais et al 1996) and are part of a continuum, the archaeology of religion is greater than the archaeology of the Church (there can be a tendency to conflate these: Maldonado 2012); each needs understanding in the context of wider society and landscape, and from an interdisciplinary perspective. That the rituals of religion are everywhere and in the every day, and it is impossible to separate the domestic and ritual (cf Bradley 2005, 210), does not negate or diminish the need for a greater modern focus on the archaeological evidence for its most recognisable physical expressions, and their materiality (cf Insoll 2011, 1): our Christian sculpture and early churches, their associated ecclesiastical complexes, and landscape contexts. These were still places where people performed formalised as well as personal rituals, and where individual and group memory was exteriorised through the production of artefacts, monuments and landscapes (cf Gilchrist 2012, 13-14). And they help us to answer the most basic what, when and where questions that we still sorely need answers to.

Stephen Driscoll's comments on the Pictish Church apply to the country as a whole:

... almost nothing is known about the origins of the Church and its development before the eleventh century ... This must be considered a priority for the future (Driscoll 2011, 270).

The Medieval section of the 2013 *Scottish Archaeological Research Framework* (ScARF 2012) mirrors this need, although the reader needs to piece together what is relevant to the Church and early Christianity (a reflection of the document's thematic structure as well as the interests of its many authors). Charles Thomas, in 1971, is the first and last person so far to have attempted any significant overview of the different sources for the early church across Scotland, with his inspirational *The Early Christian archaeology of north Britain* (Thomas 1971). In relation to burial, the influential paradigms inherited from Thomas, in particular, are only now being revisited (Maldonado 2011; 2013). Scotland still lacks a modern version of the *Early Christian monuments of Scotland* (Allen and Anderson 1903), although there is the excellent *Early Medieval sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands* and *Art of the Picts* (Fisher 2001; Henderson and Henderson 2005). Since Thomas, Ian Smith and Ian Fisher published short overviews of the current state of knowledge and issues in Scottish church archaeology, and more recent books provide basic introductions (Smith 1996; Fisher 1996; eg Carver 2008, 37-42; and Foster 2014, ch 5; Jones 2013 is useful for broader British developments).

The absence of any overarching archaeological research strategy for the early church in Scotland may, with hindsight, help to explain Historic Scotland's regrettable decision in 2005 not to excavate to its earliest levels the Anglian church at Auldham (East Lothian). This exceptionally rare beast – a previously unrecognised abandoned church with pre-twelfth-century origins – was discovered when ploughing brought up human remains. We should also allow for how, in the last couple of decades, we have glided to a new norm of expectation and perception of the early church. In good measure, this arises from recent publication of large or largish-scale excavations that mostly took place in the 1990s. With the exception of Iona (an earlier project), Hoddum

and Auldham, these were research-driven initiatives rather than prompted by rescue needs. In order of full publication, the key projects are:

- Iona (Argyll and Bute) 1979 (Barber 1982; see also St Ronan's chapel: O'Sullivan 1994)
- Whithorn (Dumfries and Galloway) 1984-91 (Hill 2006; McOmish and Petts 2008)
- Hoddom (Dumfries and Galloway) 1991 (Lowe 2006)
- Inchmarnock (Argyll and Bute) 1999-2004 (Lowe 2008)
- Isle of May (Fife) 1992-7 (James and Yeoman 2008)
- Hirsel (Scottish Borders) 1979-82, 1984 (Cramp 2014)
- Portmahomack (Easter Ross, Highland) 1994-2007 (Carver 2004; 2008; Carver et al 2016; Carver, this volume)
- Auldham (East Lothian) 2005 (Crone and Hindmarch 2016; Hindmarch and Melikian 2006)
- Govan (Glasgow) 1994-6 (Driscoll 2003).¹

Jerry O'Sullivan's analysis and commentary on the terribly piecemeal excavation history on Iona forcibly makes the point for large-scale, strategic fieldwork rather than 'death by many cuts' (O'Sullivan 1998). Archaeology now begins to provide the necessary counter-balance to church histories written from the surviving documentary sources, with their bias towards the Columban church. The archaeological evidence for greater late- and sub-Roman Christianity among those living on or close to the periphery of the Roman Empire – Britons in western and northern Britain, and quite probably the southernmost Picts – forces us to question the traditional, literary-derived modes and routes of conversion, from north to south (Petts 2003; Fraser 2009, 68-115; Seaman 2012). This Columban dominance is something that place-names studies are also redressing (eg Clancy 2008). Place-names add nuance to our appreciation of the workings of the Columban Church in Pictland (eg Clancy 1996; Taylor 1997), although the historian James Fraser now plays down the extent of impact that the Columban church had in Pictland prior to the late seventh century, and this has implications for how we understand the subsequent Verturian support for the Columban church (Fraser 2009).

In terms of excavated remains, we still have very little to go on for the church and sacred core of a site, and certainly nothing to compare with the excavations, however partial still, of the Anglo-Saxon monastery at Wearmouth and Jarrow (Co Durham). Like Wearmouth and Jarrow, however, we need to recognise that churches, their internal fittings and associated buildings for any ecclesiastical community will combine external architectural influences as well as native traditions in layout and construction (Cramp 2005, ch 24 in particular). Although no churches are standing in Scotland, and we only glimpse bits of possible ground plans (notably St Ninian's Isle, Shetland: Barrowman 2011), we can now more readily allow that the Picts built a small number of technically accomplished and ornate stone churches. At Portmahomack, the excavators are not certain if the lower levels of the east wall of the present crypt is the vestige of an eighth-century building, but sculpture surely implies a church enclosing some decorated stone sculptures,

1 The text lists key sources for excavations at their first mention only.

both architectural (a small corbel), fittings (such as thin slabs and an upright post grooved to hold a slab in place) and furnishings (a possible stone chair and an elaborate sarcophagus). The overall volume of fine stone sculpture leaves us in no doubt of the inhabitants' capacity to quarry, transport and finely work stone. Until Tómas Ó Carragáin's recent research on the early Irish church architecture, there had also been generally low expectations of this material (Ó Carragáin 2010). Ireland has a decent number of pre-Romanesque upstanding stone churches to work with, although few pre-date the eleventh century. Notably, Ó Carragáin has been able to consider liturgical aspects of the architecture (Ó Carragáin 2009a). His work also explores the Irish shrine church, the earliest example of which, he argues, was St Columba's Shrine on Iona, most likely built over Columba's burial place at the time of the enshrinement of his relics in the mid-eighth century (reconstructed in the late twentieth century without its characteristic *antae*). The choice of building materials for church buildings and sculptures reflected availability of resources, and the ability to procure and transport them, a little studied subject (but see Miller and Ruckley's 2005 study of the geological source of Pictish sculptures). We now have evidence in Scotland for how elaborate and large a timber church might be – the Minster church at eighth-century Whithorn with its complex internal sub-divisions (on the continent large and important churches were also built of timber, summarised by Ó Carragáin, above) – to which we might add the nice evidence from Iona for skilfully made timber fittings. At Whithorn and St Ronan's, Iona, ecclesiastical buildings were clay-bonded. Coloured window glass comes from Whithorn and now Iona (pers comm Ewan Campbell). In the largely tree-less Northern Isles, timber could still be a building component, but combined with stone and turf, as at the Norse chapel on the Brough of Deerness, Orkney, with its possible pre-Norse predecessor (Morris 1986). Corbelled upstanding structures in the Western Isles, such as on the Garvellachs and North Rona, are fiendishly difficult to date, and cannot be proved to be contemporary with what may be seventh- to ninth-century carved stones; Ireland's examples seem unlikely to pre-date the tenth century (O'Sullivan et al 2014, 169-70). A few of the upstanding or grassed-over foundations of small, single-cell structures in western Scotland and their associated remains, such as Sgòr nam Bán-Naoimha (cliff of the holy women) on the island of Canna (Highland), are generally assumed to be early Christian, but lack scientific dating.

For these larger sites, from excavation we now have some understanding of what takes place in their outer extremities but exceedingly little of the church and sacred core. From the University of York excavations at Portmahomack, we know that a massive sub-rectangular ditch and bank enclosed a graveyard and a series of workshops for fine metalworking and vellum working, built on either side of and connected by a well-laid road. This is interpreted as a large monastery established in the eighth century on the site of an earlier Iron Age settlement and burial place, possibly after a break in settlement. Regardless of the presence/absence of building material of any church building, these discoveries have finally given the lie to the notion that Picts were not capable of major intellectual, ecclesiastical, architectural, technological and artisanal enterprises.

Ecclesiastical sites clearly ranged in size, status and function. It is from Portmahomack and the other large-scale excavations mentioned earlier that we have begun to gain an important insight into their economic and technological basis. Work focussing, in particular, on the extremities of enclosed sites (the zones most readily available for investigation, and most vulnerable to development) reveals evidence for a hierarchical and zoned use of space for functions that include not just worship, burial, living, education, industry and crafts, but also large-scale food-processing enterprises (at Hoddom). Disappointingly, given the surviving outputs, we have yet to discover a sculpture workshop.

From the eighth century onwards, excavated church sites comprise our main visible evidence for power centres of any form. As in Anglo-Saxon England, the church had apparently become part of the aristocratic Establishment (cf Wormald 2006, ch 2), although what this means in practice on the ground is generally far from certain. Indeed, we must learn from the example of Flixborough in Lincolnshire. Here a seventh- to ninth-century Anglo-Saxon, high-status rural settlement is difficult to distinguish on archaeological grounds from a contemporary monastic site, with its evidence for literacy, burials, long-distance exchange and specialist craft-working (Loveluck 2007). From excavations it is now more widely recognised that Early Medieval settlements can incorporate burials, but not necessarily associated (or leastways distinctive) church buildings. Meantime, mortuary chapels, oratories or churches, not necessarily associated with burial evidence, are a component of Anglo-Saxon and continental settlements that are excavated on a large scale (Loveluck 2007, xvi; Ó Carragáin 2009b). So, we might also think of the Picts and their neighbours supporting diverse settlements that might incorporate a church, or a religious presence indicated in some way by sculpture. ‘Church-settlement’ embraces the notion of a major complex church site with multiple functions and possibly sited at a royal centre; this is what we might envisage for St Vigeans (Angus) or Meigle (Perth and Kinross) (Woolf 2013, 56), to name but a few examples.

Beyond excavations, re-examination of Early Medieval sculpture is also offering new insights into the architecture of church buildings. Long recognised as including some architectural sculpture, the interpretation of new and existing material is expanding the range of this assemblage (an arch, lintels, decorative architectural panels, some possibly for dividing space, internal fittings, chair finials, etc), and there may be other possibilities. Some of the sculpture was surely also intended for use *in* buildings, such as cross-slabs and recumbent stones in mortuary chapels (Henderson and Henderson 2005, ch 7; Clarke et al 2012, 92-7). By way of example, Jane Geddes’ research on the assemblage of Pictish sculpture from St Vigeans enables her to evoke a stone church with ornate furnishings and possible internal divisions, enclosing highly valued relics and high-status burial monuments. The iconography tells of intellectual and theological rigour, and of concerns with pre-Christian practices such as bull sacrifice and pagan priesthood. Some of the monuments stood outside, and we get a sense of how the church’s cycle of rituals extended from the church’s distinctive knoll and into its wider estate (Geddes 2017).

We do not have descriptions for Wearmouth and Jarrow, but, in our mind’s eye, our churches are also better equipped. For,

who could imagine, for example, that the Pictish churches, patrons of vigorous schools of sculpture were without the necessary books and place for the celebration of the Eucharist or a range of scholarly texts for teaching purposes? Indeed, what we know of Pictish metalwork and sculpture encourages us to think that patronage of the arts in the service of the Church was of a high order (Ryan 2013, 8; as illustrated by, for example, Henderson and Henderson 2005, ch 4).

The extraordinary series of slates inscribed with texts and sketches recovered from the monastery on Inchmarnock vividly illustrates how the Church provided learning in the west. We should expect monastic schools in eastern Scotland too. George and Isobel Henderson challenge historians and archaeologists to ‘allow for a political maturity and economic infrastructure’ that is the match for the production of the Christian art that they interpret as evidencing a deeply erudite mindset (Henderson and Henderson 2005, 13, 180). Historians’ revelations about Picts’ use of literary sources to shape their identity provide indirect support for the prevalence, degree and influence of ecclesiastical scholarship, despite the lack of surviving Pictish documents (Evans 2011; Fraser 2011; Maldonado 2012).

2.3 Scottish early church archaeology in Europe

So, with some sense that our perception and expectations of the archaeology of the early church in Scotland is transforming, although the archaeological evidence-base and landscape perspective is still very slight, we should now consider some of the implications of thinking about the church in Scotland *in Europe*. The spread and universalising nature of the Church, and its inter-weaving with the social and political landscape, arguably facilitated the earliest Europeanisation. When we work with church archaeology, we are dealing with a connected people who are part of an extensive network, as the material culture, in particular, suggests. The influences of this process can be felt even before places convert, as in Scandinavia (Andrén 2005, 130). It is probably fair to say that most European scholars do not generally appreciate or necessarily value what happens in northern Britain in relation to their own work, or see how what happened in what is now Scotland more generally makes a contribution to European evolution as a whole; they are not helped by the tendency to focus on the contribution of the Irish and Anglo-Saxons, omitting the other peoples of northern Britain from European surveys (see Driscoll 2011; Campbell, this volume). Patrick Geary’s analysis of the roots of this issue for Scandinavia is just as pertinent for Scotland (Geary 2013). He identifies two different scholarly traditions at the heart of the problem.

The first sees the northern and western peripheries of Europe as marginal in some way – continental Europe is normative and elsewhere is deviant. The scholarly ‘home’ predilection for finding ‘resistance’ to Christianity in interpretations of the Scottish archaeological evidence is conceivably the flip side of this. To add to this, the anthropologist Jon Holtzman’s study of the global in the local explores how the marginal nature of the local/periphery (as opposed to the global/centre) is bound up with the idea that it is spatially distant and historically prior, offering a window to a *past* something (Holtzman 2004). In passing, Holtzman’s work also invites us to reflect on the percep-

tions that our Early Medieval peoples themselves had of what local was in relation to the thing that was Christianity, and how this could have affected the ways in which they expressed their beliefs through material culture.

Geary's second scholarly tradition sees expansion from a centre (in this case Rome) to peripheries (what Holtzman refers to as the explicit social hierarchy, in which the centre moves to the rest). This approach leads to a common, homogenised culture rather than considering how what was 'colonised' might have contributed to European culture in general, or had an impact on particular forms of culture in different parts of Europe. This is a perspective that has traditionally dogged discussions about the contribution of the Picts to Insular art, for example (see Barclay 2001 on this and related issues in regard to Scottish prehistory, much of which has resonance for other periods too).

Overall, Geary's point is that there are universal aspects of Christian belief and practice that are shared wherever they are found, but that the realities on the ground, which include geographical position and prehistoric precursors, make for differences whether at the 'self-proclaimed centre or self-proclaimed periphery' (Geary 2013, 267); peoples converted Christianity, rather than the other way around (Maldonado 2011, 42). The implication of this is for how we as a community of researchers work on the church across Europe, given the reality of current practice is that our work is regionally and chronologically fragmented. Working in different places, with different resources, and emerging from a multitude of historiographical traditions, we have very different emphases and approaches (cf Turner 2011). To the south there is a tendency to be 'boxed in by antiquated visions of [the legacy of] Roman governance and Christianity' (Carver 2014, 201). In Scotland, we are comfortable looking to Gaelic and Scandinavian areas for comparison, but risk doing so at the expense of exploring linkages with, for example, Northumbria, and other areas that were part of the Roman Empire. Fraser tellingly observes how the Northumbrian dimensions of our Early Medieval history have been downplayed at the expense of Gaelic ones (Fraser 2009). Early Medieval Scotland, from around AD 300-1100, is where prehistory and history meet. Its study demands interdisciplinary and international approaches, but most of us need shaking out of our usual territories and comfort zones to re-invigorate this process.

2.4 Whither early church archaeology in Scotland?

The key questions are therefore:

- what we do by way of regional studies to understand the basis of our diversity and local idiosyncratic responses to the relentless expansion and domination of the universal church
- what do we do that better links what happens here to what happened and is happening elsewhere in Europe?

In terms of the latter, we have begun the necessary journey of joining our Gaelic, Scandinavian and Germanic neighbours from non-Roman parts of Europe in seeking to understand the prehistoric roots of Christianity (Carver 2009; Driscoll 2011,

270). This is an approach given a massive boost by the discovery of what appears to be a Pictish royal cult centre at Rhynie (Aberdeenshire; Gondek and Noble, this volume), but we must also remember to look south too. Geary refers to this as the sacralisation of the religious landscape while introducing Christianity and desaccralisation of the pagan religious and social landscape (Geary 2013, 263), a process of change in which we should remember there is a difference between pagan beliefs and secular values, and what happens to them (Wormald 2006, 67). The work of scholars such as Stefan Brink and very recent archaeological discoveries in Scandinavia have revolutionised the appreciation of how polities there developed from a network of votive cult sites that changed significantly with the arrival of Christianity (Brink 2004; 2013; Andrén 2013). Continuity, or not, is a key issue, and one that requires greater critical treatment (eg Andrén 2011; Shaw 2013, 6-7). New excavations and landscape studies in Scotland illuminate the rich and scarcely tested potential of Scottish archaeology to contribute to this broad, European-wide research theme: Forteviot, Perth and Kinross (Driscoll 2011); symbol-incised stones in the landscape (Fraser and Halliday 2011; Noble et al 2013); and Portmahomack. To this we can add the new evidence of Iron Age ritual practices from sites such as Mine Howe, Orkney, High Pasture Cave on Skye, ‘shrines’ on brochs, or Roman hoards deposited on later prehistoric settlements, such as Birnie, Moray (Card and Downes 2003; Birch et al nd; Ritchie 2003; Hunter 2007). In places such as Orkney, this might also be pursued within the context of an excellent later prehistoric settlement record and understanding of later parish formation (Gibbon 2006).

The trajectory of the early church in what was the Roman Empire, and of its scholarship, working from an enviable range of upstanding buildings, sculptures and documentary sources, is quite different, and not an area this writer is well qualified to comment on. Relevant in this context though is the *Corpus Architecturae Religiosae Europae* (CARE) initiative, with its ambition to catalogue Europe’s fourth- to early eleventh-century religious buildings in a unified way that will allow comparison across countries for the first time (Brogiolo and Jurković 2012; see also the entire content of vol 18 of *Hortus Artium Medievalium*, the Journal of the International Research Center for Late Antiquity and Middle Ages, based in Croatia). CARE is best described as an ‘academic confederacy’ of projects (there is no centralised funding). While in some countries the rationale and focus may appear fairly focussed on the architectural history of church buildings (this was certainly the starting point, and remains a core consideration), others, such as Spain and France, are developing a tool for landscape-based analysis, driven by the questions prompted by their local resources (pers comm Gisela Ripoll and Pascale Chevalier).

In the Isles of Britain and Ireland, Dr Tom Pickles (University of Chester), Professor Nancy Edwards (University of Bangor), Dr Tomas Ó Carragáin (University of Cork) and the author (University of Stirling) are, at the time of writing, actively developing a project within the umbrella of CARE that will enable us to make meaningful comparisons across Europe while reflecting our own research interests in Early Christian Churches and Landscapes (ECCLES). Our surviving evidence better lends itself to this (see above). For Scotland, the main objective is to lead to a wider understanding and appreciation of the nature, value and significance of pre-Romanesque architecture to AD 1100. The aim is that this will include:

- increased knowledge and understanding of surviving evidence for Early Medieval ecclesiastical architecture (where ‘architecture’ embraces church buildings, including architectural fittings/sculpture, settlements, associated monuments and landscapes);
- increased availability and accessibility of information about such places, their value, significance and potential for future research;
- facilitated interpretation, presentation, management and protection of the surviving archaeological resource and early church sites; and
- increasing the cultural, social and economic potential of such places for wider public benefit.

We do need more work on church structures, not least to date them (reworking existing sources; exploring new ones). We need a greater understanding of the activities taking place around these foci, inside and outside the enclosures. The areas around churches can be vulnerable to destruction without recording since the presence of enclosures and what happened in these is not always recognised or confirmed. Cadw’s approach in Wales to assessing the nature and extent of church sites would, with some remodelling, be valuable in Scotland too (Ludlow 2009 and the report that underpinned this are the best starting point). Perhaps most exciting, is the potential for greater interdisciplinary working on a landscape-scale, by joining forces with historians and toponymists and reflecting on the outcomes of their work. In addition to our sculpture, church-related place-names are the main tangible legacy of the Church’s transformation of the social, political and economic landscape, and with it the eclipse of the pagan one (cf Geary 2013, 263). Since the end of 2014, we can now access the University of Glasgow’s *Saints in Scottish place-names* website (University of Glasgow 2014). Names containing saints names, or allusions to incidents in their lives, are one of approximately six categories of place-names that reflect different aspects of the early church, the others being: places for worship, usually a church or chapel; places where religious communities lived and worked; places set aside for sanctuary; places whose income supported the Church; and places to which people have attached some sort of religious quality (Taylor 1998). The *Saints in Scottish place-names* database will therefore highlight many but not quite all relevant place-names of interest to understanding the early church. Other projects and the longer-term visions for a Scottish place-names database offer the opportunity to capture these (pers comm Thomas Clancy and Simon Taylor). Such place-names help us to identify and categorise early sites, and to explore saints’ cults and their relationship to secular polities, which we will shortly also be able to do in comparison to early units of land assessment – davachs and their equivalents (see Ross 2006; 2011, ch 1; 2015; Ross, this volume). The *survey of dedications to saints in Medieval Scotland* website also contains some relevant and complementary material (University of Edinburgh nd).

A series of detailed interdisciplinary case studies could therefore provide explanatory narratives for landscape parcels in different parts of Scotland linked to questions such as ‘How do we explain the regional character of archaeological evidence in relation to processes of Christianisation and the preceding landscape’, and ‘What can we learn from ecclesiastical architecture about when and in what ways Scotland first became “Europeanised”?’ Potential early church sites can also be pinpointed and assessed in-depth with an eye to a future era of research. Small-scale and community-led initiatives

can also play important roles here (see eg Dunning, Perth and Kinross: Campbell 2013; and Coldingham, Scottish Borders: Rhodes and Bowles 2014).

2.5 Conclusion

In a feisty short article in *Antiquity*, Martin Carver reviewed a tranche of recent publications on the Picts, a people he describes as either ‘lost, found, repossessed or argued away’ (Carver 2011). Recognising the tensions that arise from current scholarship in ‘normalising’ them, he pleas for some serious archaeological investment, to give the Picts an *archaeological* voice, to enliven them through situating them in their local landscapes. So, we must make sense of the Picts and their neighbours in their prehistoric context, but we must also look at their contribution to the study of *European* social evolution, indeed to Europeanisation. We will look to Scandinavia and Ireland because they have a better understanding of how polities developed from a landscape served by a network of votive cult sites, and in time they will look more to us. This is not, however, an excuse for not being historically informed or ignoring the ideas and questions that arise from the work of historians and toponymists. Archaeology has the unique potential to tease out the nuances of how and why people did things differently at different times in different places, to establish the impact *on the ground* of that tension between local practices and the centralising force of the church, and for uncovering pre-Christian practices.

Ultimately, we need more nuanced and tailored approaches for studying the evolution of early Christianity. We need to look back into prehistory, and seek to understand our regional diversity, but at the other extreme we also need to give fuller attention to what happened in the early Viking Age in Pictland, which is when major establishments such as Meigle (Perth and Kinross) and St Vigeans (Angus) were clearly still blazing with energy and action, at least until around 900 (Woolf 2007, 312). The general assumption (up for critical scrutiny) has been that the early ‘creative’ spirit of Christianity evaporated from the ninth century as Christianity and the Establishment bedded together, albeit with, until the twelfth century, only a ‘semi-autonomous “chain of command” stretching back to Rome’ (ScARF 2012). Our ninth- to eleventh-century churches demand as much attention as the legacy of prehistory. We also need to link better with the church archaeology of our Isles (often the domain of those with a north Atlantic focus), where Christianity gets a second bite at the cherry as the Norse convert. The historians have done a fantastic job at reworking their finite sources, we will all shortly be able to benefit from more useful and usable information about place-names and units of early land assessment, but excavations such as Portmahomack illustrate the potential difference that archaeology can and should make, as well as the unique public interest this generates.

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