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## When Onomastics Met Archaeology: A Tale of Two Hinbas

### ABSTRACT

The identification of the island named Hinba, referred to in Adomnán's *Life of Columba*, has exercised scholarly attention intermittently for hundreds of years. Successfully identifying Hinba would have the potential to enhance our understanding of the geography, politics and culture of western Scotland in the early medieval period. This article analyses Adomnán's references to Hinba and assesses the toponymic, material culture and written evidence pertaining to the islands of western Scotland, to propose Canna as the most likely location. A review of the stone sculpture and archaeological remains on Canna supports the proposition. An inquiry into the probable geographical feature referred to by Adomnán as *Muirbolc Mór* includes a summary of the known instances of the placename element *muirbolc* in Scotland and Northern Ireland and proposes that it may not, as generally thought, indicate an enclosed bay. The significance of Eigg, where one of Columba's disciples was marooned en route to Hinba, is assessed.

An island named Hinba is mentioned several times throughout Adomnán's *Life of Columba*. It has not yet been satisfactorily identified, despite considerable attention to the question. Two of the most authoritative approaches have been those of the great placename scholar William J. Watson, who was inclined to identify it as Jura,<sup>1</sup> and the leading ecclesiastical historian Richard Sharpe, who has more recently proposed Oronsay.<sup>2</sup> Neither island has yielded significant material remains of the relevant period, and yet there are other locations with extensive material remains which have not been adequately examined as potential sites for the places mentioned by Adomnán.

The location of Hinba has the potential to broaden our understanding of the ecclesiastical and secular politics of sixth- to eighth-century Scotland, and of practical considerations such as transport routes, interdependencies of the islands of Scottish Dál Riata,

<sup>1</sup> W. J. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1926) [CPNS], 83.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Sharpe (trans.), *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba* (London, 1995), 308 n.194.

and interaction between Dál Riata and the Picts. I am unable to claim that this paper resolves the question. However, I hope that by examining some less frequented aspects of the problem and drawing in some material not generally considered in such a context, it will contribute to progress in that direction. The two Hinbas of my title are the notion of Hinba based on traditionally accepted written evidence, and another, which I will present, which depends rather more on archaeological and geographical evidence.

Adomnán, abbot of Iona, wrote his *Life of Columba* around 697.<sup>3</sup> He was quite a prolific author, and one upon whom we rely for much of our knowledge of Scotland at that time. One of his other major accomplishments was the drafting and promulgation of *Cáin Adomnáin*, a law protecting women, children and clerics, and requiring fines to be paid to his church.<sup>4</sup> *Cáin Adomnáin* was a significant tool in the endless drive to assert and maintain a position of power for Iona and its family of monasteries. *Vita Columbae* was another such tool. Its primary purpose appears to have been to promote the cult of Columba, an Irish-born monk who emigrated to Scotland aged about 40, was the founding abbot of Iona, and died in 597. The *Life* draws on the hagiographic repertoire, and cannot be accepted as a strictly factual account. And yet it is in the small, and for Adomnán's purposes possibly insignificant, details that it can more safely be relied upon as factual, and is therefore perhaps most useful for the modern scholar of early medieval Scotland.

Adomnán wrote in Latin. His convention for island names is generally a Latinised rendition of the Gaelic name for the island followed by 'insula'. Thus Hinba is written as 'Hinba insula', and once in the accusative as 'Hinbinam insulam'. I reproduce here all of Adomnán's references to Hinba, with a brief comment on each.

*Alio in tempore sanctus ad Hinbinam insulam peruenit; eademque die ut etiam penitentibus aliqua praecipit cibi consuetatio indulgeretur.*

Once the saint came to the island of Hinba, and the same day he granted a relaxation of the rules about diet even for those living in penance.<sup>5</sup>

This tells us very little, except that some people living on Hinba were doing penance and Columba apparently had some authority over them. However, reading on, we find more details.

*Alio itidem in tempore uir uenerandus Ernanum prespiterum senem suum aunculum ad praeposituram illius monasterii transmisit quod in Hinba insula ante plures fundauerat annos.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>4</sup> M. Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The Law of Adomnán: a translation', 53–68 in Thomas O'Loughlin (ed.), *Adomnán at Birr, AD 697: Essays in Commemoration of the Law of the Innocents* (Dublin, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> *Vita Columbae*, i:21: A. O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson (eds), *Adomnán's Life of Columba* (rev. edn; Oxford, 1991), 46; Sharpe (trans.), *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, 127.

Likewise once the reverend man sent his elderly uncle, Ernán, a priest, to be prior of the monastery he had founded years before on the island of Hinba.<sup>6</sup>

This is more fruitful for Hinba-seekers. We learn that Columba had founded a monastery on Hinba, seemingly fairly early in his Scottish career. The fact that he appointed a prior is a clear indication that Columba retained authority over Hinba.

*Alio in tempore, cum uir praedicabilis in Hinba commoraretur insula, quadam nocte in extasi mentis angelum domini ad se misum uidit . . . sanctus uerbo obsequutus domini ad Iouam transnauigauit insulam, ibidemque Aidanum hisdem aduentantem diebus in regem sicut erat usus ordinauit.*

Once, when the praiseworthy man was living in the island of Hinba, he saw one night in a mental trance an angel of the Lord sent to him. . . . The holy man obeyed the word of the Lord and sailed from Hinba to Iona, where Áedán had arrived at this time, and he ordained him king in accordance with the Lord's command.<sup>7</sup>

This is more useful again. We now learn that Columba lived on Hinba for an unspecified period of time. The context also suggests that it was possible and apparently unremarkable to sail from Hinba to Iona in a reasonably short space of time and at short notice.

*Alio in tempore iiii. ad sanctum uisitandum Columbam monasteriorum sancti fundatores de Scotia transmeantes in Hinba eum inuenerunt insula . . . Qui eorum obsecundans iusioni simul cum eis die dominica ex more post euangelii lectionem ecclesiam ingreditur.*

Once, four saints who had founded monasteries in Ireland came to visit St Columba. When they arrived at Hinba, they found him there. . . . with them he entered the church as usual on the Lord's day after the Gospel had been read.<sup>8</sup>

This passage has excited considerable notice, and has influenced many of the suggested locations for Hinba. The usual assumption is that the four saints were expecting to find Columba on Iona. They stopped off at Hinba on the way, for some unspecified reason, and there they found Columba, as though it were a surprise to find him there.<sup>9</sup> This assumption is, in my view, a mistake, and in a way it shows how effective Adomnán's propaganda (and that of others after him) has been in entrenching the belief that Iona was the distinct centre of a large and powerful ecclesiastical organisation. This it most certainly was, but perhaps not during Columba's lifetime to the extent that we have come

<sup>6</sup> *Vita Columbae*, i.45: Anderson and Anderson (eds), *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, 82; Sharpe (trans.), *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, 147.

<sup>7</sup> *Vita Columbae*, iii.5: Anderson and Anderson (eds), *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, 188; Sharpe (trans.), *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, 208–9.

<sup>8</sup> *Vita Columbae*, iii.17: Anderson and Anderson (eds), *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, 206; Sharpe (trans.), *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, 219.

<sup>9</sup> E.g., CPNS, 82; Sharpe (trans.), *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, 307 n.194.

to believe. There is a widely accepted construct that positions Iona as the centre of Columba's world, his home, where he lived out his life after leaving Ireland. However, Adomnán's *Life* tells us that after founding Iona Columba was 'living' on Hinba for some time,<sup>10</sup> and 'staying ... for a time' back in Ireland,<sup>11</sup> as well as spending 'some time in the land of the Picts',<sup>12</sup> amongst other places. Indeed, the *Life* is liberally sprinkled with such clauses as 'while St Columba was living in Iona', a reference which would surely have been unnecessary had Columba actually made his residence on Iona with any sort of permanency.<sup>13</sup> Adomnán's narrative gives us no reason to suppose that the four saints in this episode expected to find Columba on Iona.

The use of *inuenerunt* is perhaps not entirely to be expected in this context, and is not incompatible with some surprise on the part of the four visitors; perhaps it takes the sense of 'discovered'. However, it may simply mean 'came upon', 'met with' or, as Sharpe has it, 'found', which need not imply surprise that Columba was on Hinba. Elsewhere in the *Vita*, Adomnán uses *inuenit* to mean 'found' when a person finds that a prophecy of Columba has been fulfilled, or in the concrete sense of finding a lost object, neither of which implies any great degree of surprise.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, even if Hinba had been situated between Ireland and Iona, there is no particular reason why the four saints would have stopped there if their destination had been Iona. Further, the fact that all five then went to church on Sunday *ex more*, 'as usual', may imply that Columba often went to church on Hinba on Sundays. Alternatively, it may merely imply that the way in which they entered the church was according to custom. On any interpretation, this does not suggest that the four saints should have expected Columba to be on Iona; if it has any bearing on the question, it makes it seem likely that they ought to have expected him to be on Hinba. As far as I am concerned, this passage provides no evidence for the location of Hinba between Ireland and Iona.

*Alio in tempore cum sanctus uir in Hinba commaneret insula gratia sancti spiraminis super eum habunde et incomparabiliter effussa per triduum mirabiliter mansit; ... Qui tamen Baitheneus, in Egea insula uenti contrarietate detentus usque quo illi trinales illius incomparabilis et honorificae uisitationis dies et totidem noctes terminarentur; adesse non potuit.*

<sup>10</sup> E.g., *Vita Columbae*, iii.17: Anderson and Anderson (eds), *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, 206; Sharpe (trans.), *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, 219.

<sup>11</sup> E.g., *Vita Columbae*, i.14: Anderson and Anderson (eds), *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, 38: *cum uir beatus in Scotia per aliquot demoraretur dies*; Sharpe (trans.), *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, 122; *Vita Columbae*, i.38: Anderson and Anderson (eds), *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, 70: *cum in Scotia per aliquot sanctus demoraretur dies*; Sharpe (trans.), *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, 141.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., *Vita Columbae*, ii.11: Anderson and Anderson (eds), *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, 109: *uir beatus, cum in Pictorum prouincia per aliquo ...*; Sharpe (trans.), *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, 162.

<sup>13</sup> E.g., *Vita Columbae*, i.19, i.41, i.48, ii.4, ii.5, ii.39, iii.8.

<sup>14</sup> *Vita Columbae*, iii.23, ii.45, ii.14, i.46, ii.39, i.35.

On another occasion when St Columba was living in Hinba, the grace of the Holy Spirit was poured upon him in incomparable abundance and miraculously remained over him for three days . . . However, Baithéne was held up by adverse winds in Eigg and could not be present until those three days and three nights of unique and glorious visitation had come to an end.<sup>15</sup>

There is nothing new here, except that it may be noteworthy that Columba's mystical experiences seem mostly to have happened on Hinba. Baithéne's presence on Eigg, and its relevance to this discussion, is something to which I will return.

*Hanc angelicam manifestationem Virgnous, ut praedictum est, qui ab ore sancti ilius senis cui reuelata erat indubitanter didicerat, hisdem diebus de Scotia remigans Hinba in insula reliquiis diebus uitae suae permanens sancti Columbae monacis sepius enarrabat. Qui uidelicet Virgnous, post multos in subiectione inter fratres inreprehensibiliter expletos annos, alios xii. in loco anchoritarum in Muirbulc mar uitam ducens anchoriticam Christi uictor miles expleuit.*

Fergnae soon afterwards left Ireland and sailed to Hinba, where he spent the rest of his days. Here he used often to tell the monks of St Columba this story, which he had learnt, as we have said, directly from the lips of the aged saint to whom the vision was itself disclosed. Fergnae remained for many years in obedience among the brethren and lived faultlessly. For a further twelve years he withdrew to live in isolation at the place of the anchorites in *Muirbolc Már*, and died a victorious soldier of Christ.<sup>16</sup>

Here we learn that Hinba accommodated not only a monastery, but also a place of anchorites. If Fergnae lived out his life on Hinba, yet removed from the monastery to the place of anchorites, the implication is clearly that both places were on the island of Hinba. If one accepts that reasoning, then Hinba contains a place called *Muirbolc Már*, which translates literally as 'great seabag', and may therefore be associated with a topographical feature.

This, then, is the extent of the written evidence that we have for Hinba. It leaves open a wide range of possible locations for Hinba. There are several islands in western Scotland which are unlikely to be Hinba and can be eliminated from the discussion. A number of islands still bear names which are cognate with those they were given in early medieval sources, and so can be excluded for the purposes of this discussion. These are Skye, Rum, Eigg, Coll, Tiree, Lismore, Mull, Iona and Islay.<sup>17</sup> The Garvellach islands have Gaelic names which may date to the early medieval period, but are not obviously identified in

<sup>15</sup> *Vita Columbae*, iii.18: Anderson and Anderson (eds), *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, 208; Sharpe (trans.), *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, 219–20.

<sup>16</sup> *Vita Columbae*, iii.23: Anderson and Anderson (eds), *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, 226–8; Sharpe (trans.), *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, 230.

<sup>17</sup> *CPNS*, 38–40; 95; 85; 84; 85–6; *Annals of Ulster* 592.1: S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill (eds), *The Annals of Ulster to A.D. 1131. Part I: Text and Translation* (Dublin, 1983), 94; *CPNS*, 38; 87–90.

early sources. One of them, Eileach an Naoimh, contains early medieval monastic remains, including a beehive cell, but there is some reason to believe that these islands were associated with Brendan of Clonfert, 'the Navigator', rather than Columba.<sup>18</sup> None of the Garvellachs much exceeds a mile in its longest dimension, so none is likely to have housed a good-sized monastery and a place to which anchorites might have withdrawn, much less a topographical feature described as *Muirbolc Már*. Similarly, Eilean Mór, which also has early medieval remains including the elaborately sculpted shaft of what was probably a free-standing cross,<sup>19</sup> is too small to have accommodated two monastic sites. Gunna, proposed by W. D. Lamont as the location of Hinba, can also be eliminated on the basis of size.<sup>20</sup>

Islands whose early medieval names have been replaced by names of Scandinavian origin are Gigha, Jura, Colonsay, Oronsay, Canna and the bulk of the outer Hebrides. These are notionally all available for identification as the sites of islands mentioned by Adomnán which have not been identified. Apart from Hinba, Adomnán also refers to islands named Long, Ommon, Saine and Elen whose locations have not been established.<sup>21</sup> Adomnán says that Elen was the site of a monastery, while we have no details concerning the use of the other three islands.<sup>22</sup>

We can contrast island names with maps of known pre-Scandinavian material remains. This exercise shows that Rum, Eigg, Tiree, Lismore and Iona, where written sources locate monasteries, all have material evidence in support of those claims.<sup>23</sup> Skye, Coll and Mull have relatively little, which is not particularly surprising, since these are not reported as ecclesiastical sites, or indeed as sites of significant settlement.<sup>24</sup> Six islands are of considerable interest for present

<sup>18</sup> This association is based on the identification of one of the Garvellachs, Eileach an Naoimh, with the island Ailech, where Brendan's *Life* records that he founded a monastery: CPNS, 81–2; Ian Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh, 2001), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture*, 144.

<sup>20</sup> W. D. Lamont, 'Where was Adomnán's Hinba?', *Notes and Queries of the Society of West Highland and Island Historical Research [Notes and Queries]* 7 (June 1978) 3–6; Lamont, 'Hinba once more', *Notes and Queries* 12 (May 1980) 10–15; Lamont, 'Hinba once more', *Notes and Queries* 13 (September 1980) 19–23. Lamont's argument in favour of Gunna is based essentially on Columba's excommunication of the sons of Conell at Hinba, and Lamont's assumption that Hinba was therefore the closest church to Conell's home, which he places at Kilchoan, Ardnamurchan. Even if these assumptions are correct, they do not necessarily point to Gunna as the location of Hinba: see also W. R. McKay, 'Hinba again', *Notes and Queries* 9 (January 1979) 8–17. I wish to record my gratitude to Ian Fisher for his generous assistance in locating these references.

<sup>21</sup> *Vita Columbae*, ii.22; i.36; ii.45; ii.18.

<sup>22</sup> *Vita Columbae*, ii.24 (Long); i.36 (Ommon); ii.45 (Saine); ii.18 (Elen).

<sup>23</sup> Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture*, 95; 92–4; 123–5; 121–2; 126–35.

<sup>24</sup> Skye has nine cross-marked stones and one rock-cut cross: *ibid.*, 102–5; Coll has no recorded early medieval stone sculpture. Mull has five cross-marked stones and two caves with incised crosses: *ibid.*, 123–6. Given the relative sizes of the islands, the sculpture on Skye and Mull is probably not indicative of intensive Christian activity, although the possibility remains open.

purposes. Jura has just one pillar with simple cross markings. Oronsay has no identified early medieval remains at all. Colonsay has seven simple cross-marked or cruciform stones, two decorated fragments and a very interesting stone with a crucifixion variant. Gigha has two cruciform stones, a cross-incised slab and a pillar with an inscription in Irish ogham. Canna has two sites with over a dozen sculptured stones between them. I shall consider these five islands individually.

Jura is a popular contender for Hinba. Watson advanced its claims on the basis of its Scandinavian name and its large sea-loch, the somewhat bag-shaped inner portion of which he suggested was *Muirbolc Már*. He also believed that the name Hinba might be related to the Gaelic word *inbhe*, meaning incision, which would correspond with the shape of Jura, but which appears not to be supported by strong evidence.<sup>25</sup> In my opinion the identification is highly unlikely. I find it difficult to accept that we could identify the island which housed a good-sized monastery and a separate place of penitents and hosted visits from groups of famous Irish saints, and find nothing significant by way of material remains. Whilst one should always be mindful of the adage that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, Jura has been surveyed by the RCAHMS and absolutely nothing significant has come to light. A lack of investigation would be sufficient to explain the absence of excavated monastic remains, but stone sculpture of this period in this region is generally in situ or nearby, and clearly visible. Accepting that there may be reasons for non-survival specific to one locality, nonetheless it seems unlikely that Jura, where one item has survived in apparent isolation, and in a fairly prominent location, ever had a large body of stone sculpture. The single cross-marked pillar<sup>26</sup> seems to me most likely to have been set up to mark a landing place or portage route, and the cross-marking may even be secondary.<sup>27</sup> The cave on the north shore of Loch Tarbert, Jura, known as *Uamh Muinntir Í*,<sup>28</sup> lends some support to the suggestion that Jura was visited by clerics from Iona, but gives no evidence that it was home to a permanent monastic settlement. There are also dedications on the island to both Columba and Ernán, but neither has been demonstrated to predate the Scandinavian period, although one is immediately adjacent to the cross-marked stone and the sea-loch.<sup>29</sup>

Richard Sharpe, the most recent translator of Adomnán's *Life of Columba*, whilst acknowledging the apparent impossibility of resolving the location of Hinba, advances the claims of Oronsay, based on his belief that Hinba lay on the sea-route from Ireland to Iona, that it

<sup>25</sup> CPNS, 82–4; Sharpe (trans.), *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, 308.

<sup>26</sup> Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture*, 136.

<sup>27</sup> P. O'Neill, 'Reading cross-marked stones in Scottish Dalriada', *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* 2 (2006) 195–208, at 205–6.

<sup>28</sup> Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> CPNS, 83; Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture*, 10.

had a substantial dry anchorage, and that it had a *muirbolc*.<sup>30</sup> Sharpe proposes that a *muirbolc* may be characterised by ‘the emptying out of the sea at low tide’. This suggestion appears to be based solely on his premises that *Muirbolc Mór* is at Oronsay, and that *Muirbolc Paradisi*, also mentioned by Adomnán, is Kentra Bay in Ardnamurchan, both of which are tidal. Since neither of the premises is established, Sharpe’s characterisation of *muirbolc* may be far from conclusive, and appears to be a somewhat circular argument. Crucially, there is no evidence of early medieval remains on Oronsay. Therefore Sharpe’s suggestion that the later medieval priory here may have continued an earlier Columban foundation<sup>31</sup> is unsupported by material evidence. Indeed, the survival of a significant quantity of sculpture from this later priory would lead one to expect at least some remnant of any earlier sculpture on the site to have survived the ravages of time and reformation.

Oronsay’s larger neighbour, Colonsay, has a greater quantity of sculpture, but dating it is problematic. There are several simple crosses, virtually all of which are badly worn and fragmentary. These monuments are extremely difficult to use diagnostically because of difficulties in dating. There are also two pieces with interlace which appear to be late, probably postdating the arrival of the Scandinavians. The larger of the interlaced pieces, found at Balnahard and now in the National Museums of Scotland, has the expanded and bifurcating interlace which tends to indicate Scandinavian influence. The smaller piece, now at Colonsay House, has a greater probability of being early, but diagnosis is difficult with such a small fragment, and in any case the provenance of the piece is unknown.<sup>32</sup> The most interesting piece of sculpture from Colonsay is that apparently representing a crucifixion.<sup>33</sup> Here the upper part of the stone takes the shape of a human head, while I would suggest that the fishtail-like shape in the upright and spiral patterns in the cross-bar are intended to represent an ecclesiastical vestment, with the faint incised outlines of legs below. There are no parallels for this object in the early medieval sculpture of Scotland or Ireland, although there is a faint resemblance to the rare manuscript crucifixions in the gospel books of Durham and St Gall, both of Northumbrian origin. Because of the lack of satisfactory parallels for this object, it is difficult to suggest a context for it. There is a local tradition that an early monastery existed on Colonsay, but

<sup>30</sup> Sharpe (trans.), *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, 308.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture*, 136. Fisher notes that the fragment is ‘of unknown provenance’, suggesting that the RCAHMS was unable to find any evidence as to its origin. Its presence at the home of the local landowner opens the possibility that, like so many other sculptured stones in Scotland, the fragment was collected elsewhere. It is of epidotic schist, which is local to Colonsay, but also to other localities, such as Islay.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.



the RCAHMS found no evidence for it.<sup>34</sup> So the remains on Colonsay, all sculptural, are difficult to contextualise, and possibly too late to be associated with Hinba. There is nothing which is definitely of the appropriate period, although the possibility remains that some pieces, including the crucifixion, may be.

The island of Gigha has early medieval stone sculpture at two separate locations, neither of which has yielded any evidence of early medieval settlement. At Tarbert, near the north end of the island, there is a broken free-standing cross which bears an incised margin and hollowed armpits, but no sign of further elaboration.<sup>35</sup> Not far away is a large flat-topped slab with several small incised crosses, which appear to have been made by pecking.<sup>36</sup> Toward the south end of the island, at Kilchattan, is another cruciform stone of much cruder design and undecorated.<sup>37</sup> At nearby Cnoc na Carraigh, a pillar is inscribed with a memorial in Irish Ogham. The inscription is too damaged to be read clearly, but appears to be a name something like 'Viqula Maqi Comgili',<sup>38</sup> which suggests that, although presumably made by Irish-speakers, it is not ecclesiastical, and not necessarily even Christian, in origin. None of this sculpture is of a kind that might be expected of a monastic settlement, such as high crosses or monastic gravemarkers. Rather, these pieces are more suggestive of markers indicating sites that were visited, possibly regularly, by ecclesiastics.<sup>39</sup> There is thus no evidence to suggest that Gigha housed a monastic foundation, or that it can have been Hinba.

The material remains on the island of Canna are distributed over two sites. The first is Keill or A'Chill (translating as 'the church') on the eastern part of the island near to the main harbour. Here there were eleven rough stones with fairly simple crosses.<sup>40</sup> While most of these are of unknown provenance, their concentration on a single site suggests that they could be grave markers, or conceivably boundary markers or penitential stations of some kind. A'Chill is also home to the Canna Cross, a badly damaged freestanding cross which appears to be a hybrid of Irish-Dalriadan and Pictish design. The horse-rider and the two animals above it in very high relief are directly comparable

<sup>34</sup> Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, *Argyll: an Inventory of the Monuments*, vol. v, *Islay, Jura, Colonsay and Oronsay* (Edinburgh, 1984) 157–263 *passim*; Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture*, 136.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* The approximation of the name is mine, selected from Forsyth's properly cautious interpretation (K. S. Forsyth, 'The Ogham Inscriptions of Scotland: an edited corpus', Harvard University PhD dissertation, 1996: quoted by Fisher). Regardless of the correct reading, enough is legible to make it clear that the inscription is the patronymic formula, common in Ireland and not necessarily Christian in origin, probably in the genitive: '[the stone/land/memorial] of X son of Y'.

<sup>39</sup> See O'Neill, 'Reading cross-marked stones'.

<sup>40</sup> Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture*, 96–7.

to those on many Pictish monuments. On the narrow edge, two small clothed human figures have enlarged heads with narrow chins in the Irish style, although their hands are crossed at the groin in a gesture that is not particularly Irish or Dalriadan. The presence of a probable crucifixion in the cross-head, if it could be established, would certainly be in the Irish-Dalriadan tradition, although its details are lost.<sup>41</sup> Since these high crosses are virtually always associated with monastic sites, this may well be a site of that kind. The Pictish influence is interesting, and probably reflects the location of Canna near the Pictish areas of Skye and the mainland.

The apparent virgin and child with attendant figure, while a recognisably Dalriadan motif, shows Pictish influence. Ross Trench-Jellicoe draws parallels between the Canna virgin and child and others found in Angus.<sup>42</sup> He suggests a complex transmission where the motif from Dalriadan high crosses was adopted in the Angus monuments, and then transferred thence to Canna. While the existence of a relationship is indisputable, I disagree with Trench-Jellicoe's dating, which appears to be based largely on the typology of penannular brooches. This typology is somewhat difficult at best, and considerably complicated when dealing with depictions of brooches rather than the objects themselves, particularly when those depictions are damaged.<sup>43</sup> His suggestion that the distinctive hairstyle found at Canna and Monifieth is due to a misinterpretation of the angels' wings on the Dalriadan high crosses seems to me unlikely, particularly since the hairstyle is one that can be seen worn by women in the modern era.<sup>44</sup> Putting the somewhat difficult issues of brooch typology and hairstyle to one side, Trench-Jellicoe's argument for sequence of transmission and dating is difficult to support. The historical background he advances leans heavily on the expulsion of the Columban clergy across Druim Alban recorded in the Annals of Ulster.<sup>45</sup> Recent scholarship is increasingly inclined to view this incident as a minor one involving a small number of clergy, rather than a wholesale exile, as Trench-Jellicoe seems to see it.<sup>46</sup> I suggest that the Canna cross is much earlier than he posits, belonging not to

<sup>41</sup> R. Trench-Jellicoe, 'A missing figure on slab fragment no 2 from Monifieth, Angus, the a'Chill Cross, Canna, and some implications of the development of a variant form of the Virgin's hairstyle and dress in early medieval Scotland', *PSAS* 129 (1999) 597–647, 631.

<sup>42</sup> Trench-Jellicoe, 'A missing figure', esp. 602–15.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 610, acknowledges the difficulties of dating brooches by style, and suggests a date in the second half of the eighth or the ninth century for the depiction of a brooch on the Canna Cross.

<sup>44</sup> The style is a practical one, where the hair is divided into two plaits, originating near each ear, which are then crossed at the top of the head. It was particularly popular in the Victorian period: see, for example, 'Victorian Hangover', [http://www.anotherurl.com/photos/family/old\\_hubbard/Victorian\\_Hangover\\_ch\\_15.htm](http://www.anotherurl.com/photos/family/old_hubbard/Victorian_Hangover_ch_15.htm) (accessed 24 February 2006).

<sup>45</sup> AU 717.4: Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill (eds), *The Annals of Ulster*, 172.

<sup>46</sup> See e.g., J. Grigg, 'Expulsion of the *Familia Iae* over the Spine of Britain by King Nechtán', in P. O'Neill (ed.), *Exile and Homecoming* (Sydney, 2005), 31–42.

the mid-ninth century, but rather to the eighth, a near contemporary of other Dalriadan high crosses.<sup>47</sup> Rather than an import from Angus, I see the virgin and child motif at Canna as a hybrid of Irish-Dalriadan and local (west of Druim Alban) Pictish influences, and an export to Angus.

A second sculptured piece from A'Chill has on one face a large human figure with a decorated snake intertwined with its legs. Although the figure is not complete, it does not appear to be Irish in style. It is perhaps more likely to be Scandinavian. The opposite face has abstract ornament, of which the most notable feature is an interlaced group of eel-like creatures, which Ian Fisher points out are related to snakes found in the Book of Kells.<sup>48</sup> However, the overall effect suggests that there are other influences on this monument stronger than the Irish,<sup>49</sup> and in my view this sculpture does not provide useful evidence concerning the potential existence of a Columban monastery at A'Chill.

No structural remains of any early medieval settlement have been found at A'Chill, and it is unlikely that any informative remains will be found there. It was the site of a village until the Clearance of 1851, although there is little sign even of the village today.<sup>50</sup> The site is in the form of a large amphitheatre, protected on the landward side by the island's higher ground, and effectively concealed from the seaward approach until the visitor crests the lip of the amphitheatre, when the large flat area is revealed. This area could easily accommodate industrial activity such as the processing of rural produce or the production of vellum or other goods. It also has the capacity to accommodate living quarters for a large number of people, with the possibility of dispersed separate dwellings. These characteristics are consistent with the requirements for a 'place of anchorites' where periods of penance might be served consistent with the provisions of laws such as *Cáin Adomnáin*.<sup>51</sup> Such penance or 'hard regimen' might be expected to

<sup>47</sup> Contra D. Mac Lean, 'Maelrubai, Applecross and the late Pictish contribution west of Druimalban', in D. Henry (ed.), *The Worm the Germ and the Thorn: Pictish and Related Studies Presented to Isabel Henderson* (Balgavies, 1997) 173–87, at 180. Mac Lean argues a tenth-century date for the Canna Cross, based on some stylistic parallels. His argument is somewhat uneasy, though, since he has to concede that the Dupplin Cross, a link in his stylistic chain displaying features attributed to the ninth and tenth centuries, is 'now known to be earlier than previously thought', dating from the very early ninth century. He also finds parallels between the Canna Cross and one of the earlier, 'Iona School' monuments, the Keills Cross. Mac Lean suggests that the Canna Cross results from the displacement of Picts following 'the final unification of Picts and Scots under Kenneth mac Alpin' (181), but the notion that such a unification actually took place at that time is no longer a given: see, e.g., D. Broun, 'Alba: Pictish homeland or Irish offshoot?', in O'Neill (ed), *Exile and Homecoming*, 234–75.

<sup>48</sup> Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture*, 101.

<sup>49</sup> Mac Lean, 'Maelrubai, Applecross and the late Pictish contribution', 179, places it 'firmly in the Viking period'.

<sup>50</sup> J. L. Campbell, *Canna: the Story of a Hebridean Island* (Oxford, 1984), 162.

<sup>51</sup> *Cáin Adomnáin*, ed. and trans. P. P. Ó Néill and D. N. Dumville, *Cáin Adomnáin and Canones Adomnani* (Cambridge, 2003) 35: §33 '... *tertia iactatur in peregrinationem trans mare sub regula regimimis duri*'.

include the labour associated with supplying an ecclesiastical settlement with food and other materials. The availability of space for dispersed dwellings would enable the isolation for solitary reflection that might be required by such persons as Fergnae, within the rigorous climate of a firmly-governed, work-oriented settlement.

The second site on Canna is situated on the western part of the island, separated from the eastern part by a low-lying isthmus or tarbert between two bays. The site is known as Sgorr nam Bàn-Naomha. This is generally translated as ‘cliff of the holy women’, although the association with women is unlikely to date from the early medieval period. Indeed, the element *bàn* might be ‘fair, white’, with the secondary meaning ‘blessed, holy’. The Ordnance Survey records the element *bàn* with a length-mark over the ‘a’, where the Gaelic word *ban* for women would not have a length-mark. Thus the name might originally have indicated ‘cliff of the white holy ones’, possibly referring to the ‘white martyrdom’. The name is, however, unlikely to date from as early as Adomnán’s time. The site is almost certainly of monastic origin, although rather isolated and difficult to approach. The three sculptured stones from here are again all simple and difficult to date, although the use of the site certainly dates from the early medieval period.<sup>52</sup> The sculpture may again represent grave markers, boundary markers or aids to worship.

Sgorr nam Bàn-Naomha has been investigated by the RCAHMS, but not extensively and not by excavation. It is clear, though, that the early medieval enclosure was served by a sophisticated system of water supply and usage. Dunbar and Fisher noted that this system was unlikely to serve an industrial purpose because of the difficulty of access to the site, to which I would add its remoteness from potential sites of production or importation of raw materials on the island. Dunbar and Fisher further identified buildings which they suggested were probably associated with bath-house functions on an Irish model seen particularly at the Columban site of Innismurray, Co. Sligo. Sgorr nam Bàn-Naomha’s comparison with Innismurray is further strengthened by the circular footings of a possible beehive hut comparable to those at Innismurray and Kingarth, Bute.<sup>53</sup> Innismurray and Kingarth are both securely established as ecclesiastical settlements housing significant leaders: in the case of Kingarth, a bishop. This comparison, coupled with the apparently luxurious bathing facilities, suggests Sgorr nam Bàn-Naomha as an ecclesiastical settlement suitable for housing an important personage such as Columba. Without further investigation, it is not possible to be certain precisely what the site contained. For instance, although there is no sign of a church, there is adequate space for one in the area under surface rubble where later hut circles

<sup>52</sup> J. G. Dunbar and I. Fisher, ‘Sgòr nam Ban-Naomha (‘Cliff of the Holy Women’) Isle of Canna’, *Scottish Archaeological Forum* 5 (1973) 71–5.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

have been identified. I would argue that the inaccessibility of the site further supports its identification as Columba's Hinba monastery. Most establishments of ecclesiastical administration and residence in Dál Riata are characterised by invisibility and defensibility, a feature that is also not uncommon in Ireland itself. It is my contention that this was a necessary precaution in an environment where the activities of assorted monastic familia, generally with close links to secular dynasties, were carried out in circumstances that must sometimes have escalated into open rivalry. This environment was also subject to the risk of Pictish hostility such as that which was probably the cause of the massacre of Donnán of Eigg and his followers soon after Columba's lifetime.<sup>54</sup> The utility of a protected and defensible site to a prominent dynastic and ecclesiastical figure like Columba would be unquestionable. Sgor nam Bàn-Naomha would have been precisely such a useful and protected establishment.

Having identified two sites of ecclesiastical settlement on Canna, it seems appropriate to also seek a feature which might be identified as Muirbolc Már. The description of a 'sea-bag' is generally interpreted as referring to the shape of a body of water, as seen from above, or on a map. This may be a problematic interpretation, as the early medieval mind is unlikely to have perceived topographical features in this way. There are no maps from the period which attempt a realistic representation of the landscape as seen from above. Rather, schematic maps such as T-O maps were current.<sup>55</sup> If we take the alternative starting point of examining other surviving instances of the placename *Muirbolc*, an interesting pattern emerges. In every case listed by Watson, the name is used of a site where one or more small watercourses flow rapidly downhill to meet a large body of water, generally a loch.<sup>56</sup> In some cases, the placename adheres also to a mountain or rocky outcrop from which the watercourse flows. In other cases, the mountain or rock has another name, such as Creag Mhòr (see table 1).

There are two known survivals of the placename in Ireland, Murlough in Co. Down and Murlough in Co. Antrim. Both are on the coast, with mountains behind, in a similar arrangement to the instances of the placename in Scotland. Murlough, Co. Antrim is apparently the place referred to in *Cath Ruis na Ríg*, where a banquet is held *ac carraic Murbuilg*,<sup>57</sup> suggesting a landmark not dissimilar to the mountains listed in Table 1. It would seem possible, then, that an alternative explanation of the bag-like characteristic of a Muirbolc may lie in its quality of catching and containing rapidly downward-flowing water.

<sup>54</sup> AU 617.1: Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill (eds), *The Annals of Ulster*, 108.

<sup>55</sup> T. O'Loughlin, 'Living in the ocean', in Cormac Bourke (ed.), *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba* (Dublin, 1997), 11–23. The T-O map represented the world divided into three land masses separated by water arranged in a 'T'-shape, surrounded by ocean forming an 'O'.

<sup>56</sup> CPNS, 80–1.

<sup>57</sup> *Cath Ruis na Ríg*: E. Hogan (ed.), *Cath Ruis na Ríg for Bóinn* (Dublin, 1892), 14: §9.

Table 1: Placenames with Muirbolc.

<i>Placename</i>	<i>Body of Water</i>	<i>Modern County</i>	<i>Mountain</i>
Ardvorlich	Loch Earn	Perth and Kinross	Ben Vorlich
Ardvorlich	Loch Lomond	Stirling	Ben Vorlich
Morelaggan	Loch Long	Argyll and Bute	Tullich Hill
Murlagan (obsolete)	Loch Ness	Highland	Murligan Hill
Mùrlaggan	River Spean	Highland	Creag Dhubh
Murlaggan	Loch Arkaig	Highland	Sgurr Mhurlagain
Dunalastair (formerly Murlagan)	River Tummel	Perth and Kinross	Creag Dhubh
Murlaganmore	River Lochay	Stirling	Creag Mhòr
Muirlaggan	Loch Voil	Stirling	Creag Mhòr
Murlagan (obsolete)	Loch Achray	Stirling	Creag Mhòr

It certainly seems clear that the usual interpretation of Muirbolc Már as representing an enclosed bay should be treated with caution until further investigation of the placename is carried out.

There are several places on Canna whose topography is similar to that of the examples listed above, including the small bay immediately to the west of the junction between Canna and the neighbouring, tidally separated island of Sanday, where two streams flow down from the heights of Cnoc Mòr and Carn a' Ghail, passing to the west of A'Chill. It may be significant that the level ground at the north end of Sanday immediately adjacent to this bay is called Am Mialagan. Although this would be a very unusual development, it is not altogether impossible that Mialagan is a distortion of Murlagan. Campbell noted that the meaning of Mialagan was uncertain, citing possible derivations from *meadh lagan* and *midh lagan*, presumably meaning 'middle hollow', which does not seem particularly descriptive of this site.<sup>58</sup> If we revert to the traditional interpretation of Muirbolc Már, then the tidal bay between the other side of Sanday and Canna, enclosing the modern harbour, is a reasonable contender. It, too, is close to A'Chill. On either interpretation, Canna seems to possess the attributes necessary for identification as Hinba.<sup>59</sup>

But what of Canna's location relative to the rest of Dál Riata? I have already rehearsed my objections to locating Hinba on the route from Ireland to Iona. In my view, the entirety of Dál Riata's otherwise unclaimed islands are available for identification as Hinba. One further piece of circumstantial evidence is bequeathed to us by Columba's

<sup>58</sup> Campbell, *Canna*, 245.

<sup>59</sup> The identification of Canna as Hinba was suggested by J. L. Campbell over 20 years ago (following a suggestion by William Reeves 110 years earlier: W. Reeves, *Life of St Columba, Founder of Hy* (Edinburgh, 1874)), and he also noted the significance of Baithéne and Eigg, although I do not agree with the details of his suggestion: Campbell, *Canna*, 5–6.

faithful follower Baithéne, who spent three miserable days marooned on Eigg and missing his master's glorious visions.<sup>60</sup> I concede that one possible reading of Baithéne's predicament is that he was simply marooned on Eigg in the course of some unidentified business and unable to leave that island. Just what that business might have been would be something of a mystery, as there is no other indication that Iona had any particular interest in Eigg.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the only other island on which Adomnán suggests that Baithéne might have had business is Tiree, and it is hard to see how Baithéne could have been detained on Eigg if he had been sailing from Tiree to a more southerly Hinba. A far more convenient reading, and one that is certainly not incompatible with Adomnán's account, is that Baithéne, the good and faithful disciple, was anxious to join Columba at Hinba. Having departed Iona, or even Tiree, he sailed towards Hinba, but on rounding Eigg and entering the final stage of his journey, he encountered the fierce westerly wind which is not uncommon in those parts. This prevented him from sailing westward and reaching his destination, causing him to be detained on Eigg. Had this been so, his destination could only have been Rum or Canna. Rum is identified by name in the Irish annals, and it was home to the ecclesiastic Beccán, so it can hardly be Hinba.<sup>62</sup> I suggest that the most feasible location for Hinba is Canna.

My suggested map of Adomnán's islands situates the problematic and sought-after Hinba at a place which is compatible with all of the available written and material evidence. If Canna could indeed be identified as Hinba, there would be considerable interest in the significance of this location for interaction between Columban monks and Picts from Skye and the mainland. Further, interesting light may be shed on events recorded in the Irish annals for the nearby islands of Eigg and Rum. A possible Pictish cemetery has now been identified on Eigg,<sup>63</sup> where early in the seventh century Donnán and his monks were massacred.<sup>64</sup>

If the existence of an important early Columban monastery on Canna could be established, it would combine with evidence from Eigg, Rum and Applecross to suggest a strong Dalriadan ecclesiastical interest in Pictish territory, and an interest not just from Columban clergy, but

<sup>60</sup> *Vita Columbae*, iii.18: Anderson and Anderson (eds), *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, 208; Sharpe (trans.), *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, 219–20.

<sup>61</sup> Indeed, if there is any early basis for the entry in *Féilire Oengusso*, 17 April, there might be a suggestion that Columba might have discouraged his followers from transacting business on Eigg: W. Stokes (ed.), *Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé. The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* (London, 1905) 116–17. Stokes' translation of the entry is: "Tis this Donnán that went to Colum cille to get him for a soulfriend, and Colum cille said to him, "I will only be soulfriend," quoth he, "to folk of white martyrdom, i.e. I will not be (thy) soulfriend, for thou and the whole of thy community with thee will go to red martyrdom."

<sup>62</sup> AU 677.6: Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill (eds), *The Annals of Ulster*, 144.

<sup>63</sup> RCAHMS broadsheet, Eigg and the Small Isles.

<sup>64</sup> AU 617.1: Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill (eds), *The Annals of Ulster*, 108.

across a range of *familiae*. Two possible explanations for such a meeting of cultures would occur to me. One is that the Dalriadan clergy were reliant on the Picts to provide them with space either for expansion or for initial establishment. The other is that there was indeed a concerted effort to undertake missionary activity amongst the Picts. This is of course suggested by Bede,<sup>65</sup> but modern scholarship has rather tended to dismiss it.<sup>66</sup> Whether or not my suggestion that Canna is Hinba is accepted, I believe that the Small Isles as a group have a pivotal role to play in our understanding of Dalriadan ecclesiastical politics and Pictish-Dalriadan relations.

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<sup>65</sup> Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, iii.4: Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (eds), *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford, 1969), 222.

<sup>66</sup> E.g., Sharpe (trans.), *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, 18.