

## A Note on the Dating of Barhobble Chapel Bones and the Historical Context of their Deposition

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In the 1995 published report of the excavations at Barhobble Chapel near Mochrum in Wigtownshire, the late Bill Cormack described a structure built against the centre of the interior face of the chapel's east gable.<sup>1</sup> This was identified as an altar which had been constructed as part of a major refurbishment of the chapel probably in the earlier 13<sup>th</sup> century and labelled Period 3 (phase 2) by Cormack.<sup>2</sup> Artefact evidence suggested that this phase ended with the Wars of Independence when the chapel appears to have ceased to function as a religious site. The excavation of a High Medieval non-monastic site in Scotland is rare enough but excavation of a rural chapel site of this period anywhere in Britain is of immense importance, and even more so in Barhobble's case on account of the evidence for devotional activity and liturgical arrangements identified within the structure.<sup>3</sup> The altar structure is of particular interest, for against the east gable in the centre of the surviving lower 0.33m of clay-bonded split stone slabs of the altar was a deposit of human bone set into the clay core.<sup>4</sup> These were interpreted as 'corporeal relics', and simply marked as 'relics' on the plan of the church phase of the site.<sup>5</sup>

In 2008, samples of the bone – identified as a human cranial fragment – were sent for radiocarbon dating at the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre at East Kilbride. The sample produced a <sup>14</sup>C age of 760±25 BP (calibrated 1240-1280 AD @ 68.2% probability and 1220-1285 AD @ 95.4% probability).<sup>6</sup> Bearing in mind the possibility of contamination of the sample, this dating appears to support Cormack's 13<sup>th</sup>-century rebuilding phase for the chapel, with possible deposition of the remains occurring towards the middle decades of the century. It does not, however, support his suggestion that the bones are relics of the 6<sup>th</sup>-century Irish saint, Finian of Movilla.<sup>7</sup>

How is this deposit of a cache of mid-13<sup>th</sup>-century human bone, comprising chiefly of cranium, femur and tibia fragments, to be interpreted? Given their location within the altar, it is difficult to argue for them being anything other than relics of some individual regarded as a saint. The quantity of fragments – 19 skull pieces, 2 femur, 1 tibia and 28 unspecified worn fragments of long bones – could indicate relatively easy access to a well-preserved local burial. Sadly, however, the condition of the bone at time of excavation was too poor to allow assessment of how complete the remains had been at time of deposition. Their deposition appears to have occurred at the time of the construction of the altar, although the loss of the upper part of the altar structure prevents absolute certainty that they were not inserted subsequently. The use of relics

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<sup>1</sup> W.F.Cormack and others, 'Barhobble, Mochrum – Excavation of a Forgotten Church Site in Galloway', *TDGNHAS*, 3<sup>rd</sup> series, lxx (1995), 5-106 at 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-3.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, P.E.H.Hair, 'The Chapel in the English Landscape', *The Local Historian*, 21 (2001); N.Orme, 'Church and Chapel in Medieval England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6<sup>th</sup> series, 6 (1996).

<sup>4</sup> D.H.Lorimer, 'Report on Human Bone' in Cormack and others, 'Barhobble', 101.

<sup>5</sup> Cormack and others, 'Barhobble', 20 and Fig.7.

<sup>6</sup> SUERC-19655 (GU-17016), sample reference BAR1.

<sup>7</sup> Cormack and others, 'Barhobble', 55, 59.

in the consecration of altars had become an established feature of Western Christian religious practice from the 9<sup>th</sup> century, arising from the Emperor Charlemagne's programme for standardisation of ecclesiastical practice.<sup>8</sup> Inclusion within the structure of an altar was intended to prevent the falsification of relics and the invention of spurious cults and, through the obvious Divine acceptance of the relics into an altar, enhance the potential spiritual power of the altar through its association with the corporeal remains of a saint. The fact that the bones were embedded within the altar's clay core is, however, unusual with more common practice being for the remains to be contained within some form of receptacle which could be removed from the altar. Although the reconstruction drawing of the church phase of the site shows a slot to provide access to the deposit in the rear-centre of the altar-slab, there was no surviving evidence for such an arrangement.<sup>9</sup>

The dating of the skull fragment points towards a reconstruction of Barhobble Chapel in the turbulent years around the death of Alan of Galloway (d.1234) and the absorption of the lordship of Galloway into the Scottish kingdom.<sup>10</sup> Building-work may relate to a redistribution of estates in the western Machars in the aftermath of the Scottish suppression of revolts in 1235 or 1247. If the bones themselves are of 13<sup>th</sup>-century date, their insertion within the altar at this time is very interesting. First, the inclusion of cranial fragments may point to influences from the cult of St Thomas of Canterbury, whose *corona* or cranial top had been sliced off in during his murder by Henry II of England's knights in 1170. St Thomas's skull fragments formed the centrepiece of the Corona chapel at the east end of Canterbury Cathedral, a structure whose physical form reflected symbolically the violent manner of his death and figuratively the assault on clerical freedoms – the corona representing a priest's tonsure – which culminated in his martyrdom.<sup>11</sup> This association may be lessened by the presence of fragments of long bones in the deposit, but the date of deposition may reinforce the link to assaults on clerical freedoms. This point raises a second issue, the contemporary context for the deposition. In 1235, Galloway was subjected to a military invasion and conquest by King Alexander II to enforce the partition of the lordship between the husbands of the three heiresses of Alan of Galloway.<sup>12</sup> Opposition to that partition appears to have enjoyed significant support from the diocesan and monastic clergy in Galloway, particularly from the canons of Whithorn who used the political upheaval as a device through which to attempt to secure control of episcopal elections.<sup>13</sup> Chronicle accounts of the events of 1235, however, also refer to attacks on monasteries by elements of the Scottish army and a Becket-like context for the placement of the relics at Barhobble might be found in these events.

The *Chronicle of Melrose*, an account whose compiler was very well informed of the events of 1235 in Galloway, details attacks on the abbeys of Glenluce and Tongland.<sup>14</sup> Descriptions of atrocities committed by some of the Scottish warriors contain much that can be dismissed as stock imagery, such as the dying monk of Glenluce who was

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<sup>8</sup> B. Abou-El-Haj, *The Medieval Cult of Saints: Formations and Transformations* (Cambridge, 1994), 10.

<sup>9</sup> Cormack and others, 'Barhobble', Fig. 10.

<sup>10</sup> R.D. Oram, *The Lordship of Galloway* (Edinburgh, 2000), chapter 5.

<sup>11</sup> P. Binski, *Becket's Crown: Art and Imagination in Gothic England 1170-1300* (London, 2004), 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> Oram, *Lordship of Galloway*, 141-6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 181-4.

<sup>14</sup> *Chronica de Mailros*, ed. J. Stevenson (Bannatyne Club, 1835), 146.

stripped of the garment he was wearing and left naked in his bed, a motif used in the same chronicle in connection with a Scottish raid on the Cumberland abbey of Holm Cultram in 1216.<sup>15</sup> The chronicler, however, was more specific in the account of the attack on Tongland, where he claims that both the prior and the sacristan of this Premonstratensian house were slaughtered in the abbey church. Although the circumstances of their deaths are not described, the identification of the claustral prior, the most senior of the canons below the abbot, and the sacristan, the individual responsible for the keeping of the community's altar vestments and mass paraphernalia, and their deaths in the church, might indicate that they had been attempting to prevent the plundering of these items. In this context, the parallels with the fate of Thomas Becket at Canterbury would have been immediately obvious to any cleric and they could very easily have been presented as martyrs who died attempting to protect the liberties of the Church from secular aggression. A contemporary parallel, indeed, would be the growth of an unofficial cult around Bishop Adam of Caithness, who had been murdered at Halkirk in 1222 in a rebellion and the account of whose death is presented in the language of martyrdom and sainthood.<sup>16</sup> Bishop Adam, who had been attempting to impose payment of second teinds due to the Church of Caithness, was presented as a martyr to the cause of ecclesiastical liberties and rights. No record survives of the development of a cult around the Tongland canons, but the influence of the Premonstratensian order within Galloway generally would have provided a medium for its promotion. Why Barhobble might have participated in such a putative localised cult, however, is to enter the realm of speculation.

While the dating of the bone fragments from the Barhobble altar may seem only to offer small-scale refinement of Bill Cormack's interpretation of the site, it opens up an intriguing new perspective on the possible development of local cults and the function of cult chapels in 13<sup>th</sup>-century Galloway. The obvious failure of the cult – and chapel – to survive through the 14<sup>th</sup> century should not obscure the importance of this local manifestation of a trend in 13<sup>th</sup>-century saint-making processes of the rapid promotion of the sanctity of the recent dead and the speedy establishment of a cult. Exactly contemporary with these events in Galloway is the canonisation of Edmund of Abingdon, archbishop of Canterbury, who died in 1240 and was established as a saint in 1246 following a papal investigative commission. St Edmund had kings and bishops supporting his case, the un-named cleric whose remains were placed in the altar at Barhobble lacked such high-powered promotion.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 122-3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 139; D.Farmer (ed.), *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Oxford, 1997), 4.