

HIGHLAND REGIONAL COUNCIL



FIELD MONUMENTS

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS RECORD

4 DISTRICT ROSS & CROMARTY		5 PARISH GAIRLOCH		1 SITE CODE H N G 9 7 S W 0 0 1		2 NGR N G 9 3 1 0 7 2 3 6		3 QUAL CE		6 SITE NAME I S L E O F M A R E E		*	
7 AREA STATUS SSSI		8 SITE STATUS SCHEDULED		9 REGIONAL STATUS		10 GENERIC TYPE CHAPEL + GRAVEYARD + CROSS INCISED SLAB							
11 CONCORDANCE OS NG 97 SW 1		12 FORM GRAVEYARD+SLAB=STANDING STRUCTURE. CHAPEL-SITE OF		13 DIMENSIONS		14 PERIOD/DATE LM = MO			15 DATING METHOD DOC				
16 RELATIONSHIP OF ELEMENTS				17 CONDITION INCOMPLETE				18 SHAPE		19 THREAT AND DATE			
20 LAND USE CEMETERY				21 GEOLOGY				22 SOILS		23 VEGETATION			
24 HYDROLOGY/DRAINAGE				25 RELIEF ISLAND = ROUNDED HILL SUMMIT				26 ASPECT 360°		27 ALTITUDE 30 = 38m OD			
28 EXCAVATION (EXCAVATOR: DATE: EXTENT: QUALITY)													
29 BIBLIOGRAPHY (AUTHOR: DATE: TITLE: JOURNAL OR PUBLISHER: VOLUME: DETAIL)													
1. ORDNANCE SURVEY:1968:6" MAP 2. ORDNANCE SURVEY:1875:6" MAP 3. PENNANT, T:1774:TOUR IN SCOTLAND:Vol.2:pp381-2 4. REEVES, W:1862:PROC.SOC.ANT.SCOT:Vol.3:pp259-288 5. MITCHELL, A:1863:PROC.SOC.ANT.SCOT:Vol.4:pp251-264 (illustr.) 6. WATSON, W.J:1926:CELTIC PLACE-NAMES OF SCOTLAND:p288 7. McRAE, Rev.D:1845:NEW STATISTICAL ACCOUNT:p91 /cont.PTO...													
30 GROUND PLAN NO.						31 GROUND PHOTO NO.							
32 SLIDES NO.						33 HR. AP. NO.							
34 NMR. AP. NO.						35 OTHER AP. NO.: SOURCE							
36 ARCHIVE AND LOCATION													
37 GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY						38 SAMPLES							
39 PALYNOLOGY						40 NUMERICAL DATES: RANGE: LAB NO.							
41 SMALL FINDS						42 MUSEUM/LOCATION							
43 OTHER													
44 NAME & ADDRESS OF OWNER										45 ATTITUDE OF OWNER			
46 NAME & ADDRESS OF TENANT										47 ATTITUDE OF TENANT			
48 ACCESS & RESTRICTIONS													
49 NAME & ADDRESS OF FINDER/RECORDER: DATE								50 RECORDER: DATE AS:21.10.1985		51 CHECK: DATE			

52 TEXT

"NG 9310 7236. Chapel (site of). Burial Ground (Disused)." (1)
 "Name NG 930 723. Well (site of)." (1)
 "NG 9310 7234. Well." (2)
 "The site of a chapel founded by St.Maelrubha, as an oratory, between 671 and 722 (4). There were some remains on the spot in 1861 which were too fragmentary to determine a date of construction, but no surveyable traces now remain. The ancient burial ground surrounding the chapel site measures 90ft by 120ft (27.52 by 36.77m) and is enclosed by a rubble wall now only 2ft (0.61m) high and covered with earth and moss but described by Pennant (3) in 1774 as being 'a circular dike of stones with a regular narrow entrance.' In 1861 it contained 50 or 60 graves most of them covered by undressed, uninscribed slabs with blocks of stone at head and foot. McRae (7) mentions a 'number of tombstones with inscriptions and hieroglyphical figures but Mitchell (5) could find only two incised slabs. Each bore a distinct and /cont PTO...

6. "Otherwise known as 'Inch Maree'; 'Innis Maree'; 'Eilean Maree' (5) and 'Eilean Ma-Ruibha'." (6)

29. 8. DIXON, J.H:1886:GAIRLOCH:pp7-10
9. HBMS:1985:LIST OF SCHEDULED MONUMENTS

52. "well-formed cross, one apparently with 'arm-pits'. These slabs lay almost end to end and were said to cover the graves of a Norwegian princess and her lover. Cameron (OSFI:EGC:2.10.1964) however, thought they were of no great age. Workmen from the 17th century iron-furnaces at Poolewe (HNG 87 NE 002) are said to have been buried here. The last burial took place in 1925. A small, built well with a cover slab, consecrated by St. Maelrubha, was celebrated for curing lunacy and was still resorted to in the 19th century but was dry in 1861. Beside the well stood an oak tree into whose trunk had been driven both coins and hundreds of nails which had attached rag etc.votive offerings. Many of these were partially or wholly overgrown by the bark. 17th Century church records refer to bull-sacrifice on the island and this, together with the fact that local people refer to St.Maelrubha as 'the God Maurie' leads Mitchell and others to suggest that this was a place of pre-Christian pagan worship which was usurped by St.Maelrubha. The island name is given variously as Inch Maree, Innis Maree, Eilean Maree (5) or Eilean Ma-Ruibha (6)." (OSFI:ES:19.7.1974)

"See continuation card for text of (8)."

"NG 931 724 ISLE OF MAREE, CHAPEL, BURIAL GROUND AND TWO CROSS INCISED GRAVE SLABS" (9)

Chapter II.

THE TRAGEDY OF ISLE MAREE.

(8)

ISLE MAREE was as sweet a spot at the end of the ninth century as it is now. A thick grove of tall trees crowded round its circular Druidical enclosure. There were noble specimens of the indigenous oak, so mysteriously connected with the Druidical worship; there was a dense thicket of the smooth-leaved holly, the sacred tree brought here by St Maclrubha himself, who, it would seem, intended it to become (as it did) a Christian rival to the Pagan oak. Then, as now, the undergrowth of ferns and flowers, and a large kind of grass, attained almost tropical proportions beneath the benign influence of the warm shade.

The scene of our story is laid in this beautiful and hallowed island. St Maclrubha had been long gathered to his fathers, and the sacred college of Iona had appointed a successor to his hermitage on Isle Maree, who in turn had made room for another. The occupant of the cell at the date of our story is an aged saint of peculiar sagacity and piety. Long known to the wild people of Gairloch for his bold denunciations and shrewd penetration, he had acquired by his stern eloquence and ascetic life an extraordinary influence over them. The Christian festivals brought successive offerings to the sainted hermit, and the island oft resounded with the psalms of David chaunted by the throng of faithful pilgrims.

But not only the common people resorted to the cell of the holy man; the Norse Vikings, who held the district in partial subjugation, frequently came to him for the ministrations of religion and for the benefit of his sage counsel. To one and all, to young and old, to Celt and Norwegian, he was alike accessible.

A young Norwegian prince was chief among the Vikings who then dominated this part of the west coast. Prince Olaf was of the blood royal of Norway, and on this account alone would have been willingly adopted by his fellows as their leader, had not his personal bravery and reckless daring secured to him the post of honour. He had a grievous failing,—a restless and ungovernable temper. Naturally high-spirited, he had been as a boy the spoilt darling of his fellows, and had grown up a creature of impulse, subject to paroxysms of fearful passion. Whenever he was thwarted in his plans, or roused to anger by foe or friend, the evil spirit came upon him, and he lost all command of himself.

The prince lived with his fighting men in his great war galley, except during the winter, when they encamped on one or other of the islands of Loch Ewe. Often would Olaf repair to the hermitage of Isle Maree, and receive from the saint kindly advice and priestly absolution.

It was natural that one so impulsive should early fall under the influence of the tender passion. We need not try to imagine the story of Olaf's love; it was no common attachment; the flame burned in his breast with an intensity becoming his fiery spirit.

But a difficulty arose. He was unwilling, at least at first, to ask his bride to exchange the comparative quietude of her father's home for the restless life of a ship of war. In dire perplexity he sought the advice of his friend the saint of Isle Maree. The wise old man proposed that another and a larger dwelling should be erected in the form of a tower to the west of the enclosure in the centre of which stood his own humble cell. To this tower Olaf might bring his bride and there they might take up their abode, within easy reach of the prince's galley on Loch Ewe.

To hasten on. The prince eagerly adopted this plan, and in a short time the tower was built, and Olaf brought his bonny bride to the island. Here they were married by the aged hermit, amid the rejoicings of their followers. The princess and her maidens were delighted with the romantic and secure retreat. Olaf's attendants pitched their tents around, and the leafy grove grew gay with joyful laughter and with genial song.

For a while all went smoothly. The life of the young lovers was a continual delight; their passion for one another only increased as months rolled on. In vain his comrades sent message after message entreating the presence of the prince on board his ship. He could not tear himself away from his darling, and she in turn was more than unwilling that he should leave her. At length there came word that a long-planned expedition, in which other leaders were to take part, was ready to start, and Olaf was expected to assume the command. He dared no longer remain in retirement. With aching heart he told the princess of his approaching departure. Her tears were unavailing; on the morrow he must leave. Meanwhile strange forebodings of evil filled the minds of both. What if he should be slain in battle! What if some unknown danger should cause her death in his absence! A scheme was concocted for shortening the final moments of suspense. It was agreed that when the prince should return, a white flag would be displayed from his barge on Loch Maree if all were well; if otherwise, a black flag would be shewn. The maidens prepared these flags, and the prince took them with him. The princess was to leave the island in her barge whenever her lord's boat should come in sight, and she in like manner was to display a white or black flag to denote her safety or the reverse.

The morning came, and they parted. The prince arrived at Poolewe, was received by his men with wild enthusiasm, and set sail at once. It is not necessary that we should follow him through the perilous campaign. Enough that all ended well, and the victorious prince returned safely to Poolewe. In hot haste, and half crazy with excitement, he sought his boat on Loch Maree, raised with his own hand the snow-white banner of success, and mustered the faithful attendants who were to row him to Isle Maree.

During his absence the princess had passed through several phases of anxiety. At first despair took possession of her heart, and it was long ere the good old saint and her own maidens were able to soothe her with words of hope. As she became calmer, a new misgiving occurred to her. Did Olaf prefer the excitement of warfare to the peaceful society of his bride? Had she lost the devotion of his heart? Did he really love her? Then horrible jealousy became her absorbing feeling. Was the faithless prince to treat her as an insignificant plaything, to be caressed one day and deserted the next? It was all in vain that her companions strove to check this new folly; she declared continually that her husband had never truly loved her. Under the influence of this crushing doubt, she devised a scheme whereby she resolved to test the reality of his vaunted affection, if indeed he should ever return.

At last the lookout announced that he saw the prince's barge, bearing the white flag, emerge from the river Ewe into the open loch. And now what emotions filled the breast of the lovely princess! What conflicting sentiments, love and doubt, joy and fear! All had been arranged to carry out her strange scheme. The large barge was ready; from its stern the black flag was raised aloft; a bier was placed in the centre of the barge on which the princess herself—now pallid with anxiety—reclined as if sleeping the sleep of death; a white shroud covered her recumbent form; around were grouped her maidens, gloomy with well-simulated grief; and the sad and silent rowers moved the barge slowly onwards toward the lower end of Loch Maree.

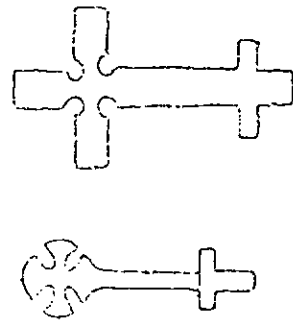
Meanwhile Olaf gazed earnestly in the direction of the island (which was kept in sight all the way), urging anon his willing crew to put forth their utmost speed. Soon, in the distance, he discovered the barge of the princess. Could he be mistaken? Was that the black flag of death which waved above it? He made all his men in turn scrutinize the approaching barge, and each reluctantly confirmed what Olaf's own eyes had testified. Gradually the prince grew frantic with awful despair. Was he to be thus foiled by evil fate in the very hour of his triumph? Had death snatched his darling from his fond embrace? Were they never to meet again? Yes, he would follow her to that heavenly home the holy father had often told them of! His agony increased each moment; he cursed; he raved; his manly face became like a maniac's; his words and gestures were those of a man possessed. The crew were horror-struck; none dared speak; they pulled the oars with what seemed superhuman strength, but the wind was against them, and some time elapsed before the barges were alongside. The dreadful interval served only to increase the prince's frenzy; his wild ravings became unintelligible.

Before the vessels touched, the madman leapt into the other barge. He saw the shroud; he raised it; he gazed a moment on the still, pale face of his bride; he gave one agonized cry; then he plunged his dirk in his own breast, and in a moment that storm-tossed heart ceased to beat!

And now the miserable princess sprang from the bier, convinced too late of her husband's passionate love; there he lay dead, she alone the cause; with a wild shriek of remorse, she drew the dirk from Olaf's heart and plunged it in her own. Her death was not so instantaneous as his, and life had not quite fled when the barge, with its terrible freight, arrived at Isle Maree. The holy father raised the crucifix before the lady's closing eyes, and uttered words of earnest prayer; then her spirit passed away, and all was over.

The bodies of the unhappy pair were buried within the enclosure on the island, beneath the shade of the sacred hollies; they were laid with their feet towards each other, and smooth stones with outlines of mediæval crosses (*see illustration*) were placed over the graves, and there remain to this day. A few stones still indicate the site of the hermit's cell, and a considerable mound marks where the tower stood.

Such, with some little filling-in of detail, is the story as commonly told in Gairloch of the sad tragedy which casts a halo of romance around the beautiful Isle Maree. There are, as might be expected, some slightly different versions of the legend, but this is the most usual one. Its variations in form only go to prove its general truthfulness, and there is no reason to doubt that the tragedy really occurred substantially as here related; the tombstones, with their ancient crosses, are still to be seen, and there is no other account of them proposed.



CROSSES ON THE GRAVES OF THE PRINCE AND PRINCESS OF ISLE MAREE.