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Raitts Chapel Site, Lynchat

A Project Design

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1.0 Introduction

This document details a project design for the survey and evaluation of the possible site of a Medieval chapel at Chapelpark Farm, Lynchat, in Badenoch (NGR NH 787 019). The site has been traditionally held locally as that of the chapel, which was dedicated to the Irish saint Molúog and was one of a suite of chapels in upper Strathspey with possible Early Medieval origins. As detailed below, the chapel is documented as early as 1380 when it and its associated lands became the subject of a dispute between the Bishop of Moray and the Lord of Badenoch. The project is designed to record the visible remains at the chapel site and to investigate the archaeological evidence for its character and date.

2.0 Site Location, Topography and Geology

The chapel site lies along the northern edge of the Spey's flood plain, at 223 m above OD. It occupies the summit of a low, broad knoll immediately north-west of the B9152, about 250 m to the east of Chapelpark farmstead. The field's topography drops away in gentle undulations to the east, north and west, with a large, probably natural oval hollow to the north-west of the knoll. Fluvio-glacial sand and gravel makes up the drift geology.

3.0 Archaeological and Historical Background

The archaeological monument to be recorded and evaluated was identified to the author as the possible site of Raitts Chapel by Meta Scarlett (pers. comm.), a local amateur historian and folklorist who spent much of her life recording Badenoch's historical traditions. Local tradition and the place name are the strongest pieces of evidence that the monument is the site of the Medieval chapel, and these are examined below. First, however, it is worth examining the wider context of chapel sites in Badenoch and the extent to which this site fits the broader pattern.

3.1 The Chapels of Badenoch

There are 14 known chapel sites in Badenoch, spaced at fairly regular intervals along the north and south edges of the Spey's flood plain and at the lower end of Loch Laggan. Although many do not display direct, physical evidence for Medieval or Early Medieval origins, some do; as a group they show a certain consistency which points to a well-established network of chapels in Badenoch in the later first or early second millennium AD. A table detailing the general location and dedication of each chapel follows.

<i>Chapel dedication</i>	<i>Location</i>
St. Eata	Kinrara
St. Drostán	Alvie
St. Adomnán	Insh
St. Drostán	Dunachton
St. Molúog	Raitts
St. Columba	Kingussie
St. Colman	Invertromie
St. Fintan	Nuide
St. Bridget	Newtonmore
St. Patrick	Biallidbeg
St. Clarment	Cluny
St. Bridget	Breakachy
St. Michael	Balmishag
St. Kenneth	Kinloch Laggan

All of the sites except the chapel dedicated to St. Kenneth, at the foot of Loch Laggan, occupy similar topographic positions: at the edge of the flood plain, and therefore hugging the margins of land which before modern drainage could have been occupied and farmed year-round. In addition, all of these chapels were dedicated to Irish saints.

Although this is not proof positive of early origins, the physical evidence for early dates for some sites and the general consistency of the group do suggest that they were dedicated at a period before the early twelfth century, when the bishopric of Moray was established. They may have come into being during the later ninth or tenth centuries, as the Gaelicisation of language and culture crept westward after Pictland had become amalgamated with Dál Riata to create the kingdom of Alba.

Several of the chapel sites have particularly strong evidence for early origins, in the form of curving enclosures, a hand-bell and a cross-incised slab. That at Insh (which became and still is the parish church) occupies a small, steep-sided knoll at the foot of Loch Insh called Tom Eunan, or 'Hill of Adomnán'. The present church structure, of post-Medieval date, sits at the lower end of a drystone enclosure containing gravestones of mainly late eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century date. The north-western end of this enclosure is empty of graves. While the remainder of the enclosure is rectangular in plan, the north-western end curves around in a semi-circular arc which may echo the line of an earlier ecclesiastical enclosure. In addition, housed within the church is a bronze quadrangular hand bell, one of only five known in Scotland (including two from Dunkeld and Forteviot, both late ninth century royal centres). All are similar in form to two from Ireland which date to about 900 AD (Bourke 1983, 464). A large font, certainly pre-dating the present structure, also resides in the church.

The chapel site at Ballmishag, dedicated to St. Michael, consists of a D-shaped enclosure defined by a low, turf-covered stony bank. At its centre is a faint, oval platform on which is an upright stone, broken but with the shaft and partial arm of a cross visible, incised on one side. The edges of the slab are cross-hatched in saltires, and on the reverse is an enigmatic incision which appears to show a face. Dedications to St. Michael (the Archangel) are frequently associated with high places. While this chapel occupies the floor of the strath, it lies close to and within view of the dramatic hilltop site of Dun-da-Lamh; it is possible that this presumed hillfort was a Pictish site of religious as well as perhaps political importance, to which Christian associations became attached and later moved down to the floor of the strath. The cross has been tentatively dated on typological grounds to the twelfth century (I. Fisher, pers. comm.).

Among the chapel sites in Badenoch, these two have the strongest physical evidence for Early Medieval or at least Medieval origins. Others have less compelling but still suggestive evidence; that at Kinloch Laggan, for example, has a granite font of possible early date near the entrance to the post-Medieval chapel structure. Still others are documented as early as the fourteenth century, including the chapels of Raitts and Dunachton, as detailed below.

3.2 *Historical Background for Raitts Chapel*

The first mention of Raitts Chapel in the historical record is in a church document of 1380. This details an argument between Alexander Bur, Bishop of Moray, and Alexander Stewart, the Lord of Badenoch (later known as the Wolf of Badenoch), in which the two clashed spectacularly over secular powers of jurisdiction over the Church.

The Church held parcels of lands in Badenoch, including those attached to the 'chapels of Rate and Nachton [Dunachton]' (*Reg. Moray*, no. 159). These lands would have been peopled by tenants who were obliged to yield a teind (or tithe) to the Church from their farming produce; the teind would have helped to maintain the chapels and their incumbent priests and would also have contributed toward the Church's income in general (Barrow 1989, 1-5).

In 1370, Stewart had pledged to act as the Bishop's sheriff in Badenoch, protecting the Church's lands there as if they were his own (Grant 1993, 143). The implication of this act is that Alexander and his followers had been terrorising and extracting goods from the tenants on Church lands, as he pledged not to do it again. However, complaints by the Bishops of both Moray and Aberdeen in subsequent years show that, far from protecting Church lands, Alexander appears to have allowed and even encouraged the terrorising activities of the cateran bands under his control, perhaps as a means of enlarging his own powers. At the same time, the Bishop of Moray tried continually to assert the independence of the bishopric from anyone but the Crown (*ibid*, 146).

Their conflict climaxed in 1380, when Alexander Stewart demanded the Bishop's presence at the standing stones of the 'Rathe de Kyngucy estir' (the rath of Easter Kingussie, the present site of St. Columba's Church in Kingussie and probably the ceremonial centre associated with the putative thanage of Kingussie; see Barrow 1989). The Bishop was expected to show his titles to Church lands in the lordship of Badenoch, including those attached to the chapel of 'Rate', as well as lands of the chapels of Nachton and others in Laggan, Insh, Kingussie and Kincardine. The Bishop appeared with a group of supporters but remained outside the court, protesting against the summons and declaring that he held these lands directly of the king. After a series of moves and countermoves, Alexander ruled the episcopal lands forfeit. The next day, however, at Ruthven Castle, he conceded the Bishop's right to the lands and the record of the case was cut out of the court roll and ceremonially burned in a fire in the great hall.

The story is fascinating for its evocation of strong personality clashes and political manoeuvring, but it also helps to flesh out the material context of the events. That the Bishop remained outside the court on 10 October 1380, delivering his lengthy protest to Alexander Stewart, suggests it was an open-air court, perhaps with Alexander sitting in judgement inside a stone circle on the hill. The group of local clergy and landowners who witnessed the ceremonial burning and show of conciliation the next day at Ruthven Castle must have been keenly aware of the tensions between the men and the power of Alexander's followers to inflict hardship or worse on local tenants and to impair the Church's income. The chaplains from the chapels of St. Molúog and St. Drostan, whose parishioners would have felt the effects of peace or hostility most keenly, might have been among them.

St. Molúog, the Irish saint to which the chapel at Raitts was dedicated, founded the monastery at Lismore near the mouth of the Great Glen and died in 592 AD (Mackinlay 1914, 157). Most of the chapels dedicated to him extend in a band eastward and north-eastward from there, possibly indicating the route his followers took on their mission work.

The enclosure (described below) which occupies the traditional site of the chapel is trapezoidal in plan, rather than circular or oval as one would expect of an Early Medieval ecclesiastical enclosure. The visible enclosure is unlikely, therefore, to be original to the chapel. However, it differs markedly from the post-Medieval, angular, drystone enclosures visible at other nearby chapel sites such as Dunachton and Invertromie, and clearly it has not been re-built or used as burial ground, as many other local sites have, in recent times.

A charter of 1575 refers to the land of 'Croft Ma Luac' (Shaw 1775, 371), probably a reference to an agricultural smallholding attached to the chapel, perhaps once occupied by the incumbent. The chapel itself, however, is not mentioned in surviving documents after the fourteenth century. Although the date of its demise is unknown, it is likely that with the elevation of Kingussie and Insh chapels to parish churches by the fifteenth century, small chapels such as that at Raitts became less relevant spiritually and less viable economically. In the case of Raitts Chapel, this

redundancy coupled with some enduring respect may have ensured the survival of the physical remains of the Medieval enclosure.

3.3 *The Chapel Site*

The site is visible as a banked enclosure, apparently trapezoidal in plan, measuring externally c 45 m ENE/WSW, 24 m along its western side and 20 m along its eastern side. It is defined along the west by a turf-covered bank roughly 1.5 m wide and 0.5 m high and along the western 18 m of its northern side by a more substantial bank, up to 1 m high and 2 m wide, with stone facing evident intermittently at its base externally. Along the south and east the enclosure is defined by sharp breaks of slope; from the surface remains it appears that here the top of the natural knoll on which it sits has simply been levelled off and perhaps augmented, rather than enhanced with a built bank. However, it is also possible that banks here have been levelled or spread by ploughing. Along the eastern portion of its northern side, this platform is less pronounced and the ground slopes away more gradually to the north.

Inside the enclosure, just to the west of its centre, is a sunken, sub-rectangular area measuring roughly 4 m east/west by 3.5 m; its west, north and south sides are defined by steep breaks of slope, while its eastern side is defined by a slight bank in which stone is visible. About 5 m to the east of this is another slight stony bank aligned north/south which might mark the eastern end of a building. However, the bank appears to align with a fragment of field wall at the southern edge of the enclosure. Both of these may be remnants of the field boundary shown on the first edition OS map.

Along the eastern part of its south side, the enclosure appears to have been truncated slightly by a stone revetment which follows the public road and retains the higher ground to the north. Several large, partly decayed stumps in the eastern and southern parts of the enclosure show that trees formerly stood on its perimeter. This planting may have taken place in the late eighteenth century, when landowners frequently planted trees on ancient earthworks, thereby drawing them into the designed landscapes which made up country estates, enhancing monuments' visual impact and alluding in some cases (most often in the case of hillforts, henges or cairns) to mythical notions of pagan groves.

The estate of Raitts entered the cultural milieu of contemporary ideas about designed landscapes when it was purchased in the late 1780s by James MacPherson, translator of the so-called Ossianic poetry. A gentleman scholar, MacPherson, like others of his ilk and generation, attempted to apply newly emerging ideas of agricultural improvement to his estate, which led to the clearance (by his son) of tenants of the townships of Easter, Mid and Upper Raitts on the higher ground to the north-west. MacPherson also commissioned an elegant mansion at Balavil, and it is likely that either he or his son made a landscape feature of the chapel site by planting trees on its banks.

The name 'Chapelark' has been attached to the nearby farmstead since at least 1870; it is shown as such on the first edition Ordnance Survey map. It suggests that traditions endured then of the site of a chapel in this area, traditions which must have been transmitted orally by local inhabitants, as no known written records from that time survive of the chapel. Roy's map of the late 1740s shows nothing on the site of the enclosure, suggesting it was not then inhabited or used. The first edition OS map shows trees outlining the enclosure, but does not name or describe the site. It also shows the enclosure bisected by a field boundary, traces of which are visible at the southern edge of the chapel and possibly inside it as well.

The name 'Lynchat', attached by 1870 to the settlement adjacent to Chapelark Farm, might also be relevant to the site. It has been translated as 'wildcats' field'. Its root, however, is related to *lann*, an Irish word used in relation to churches, and its Scottish use for 'enclosure' or 'field' could also in some cases have had ecclesiastical connotations (Watson 1926, 286).

4.0 Aims and Objectives

The overall aims of this initial season of fieldwork are:

- to record the visible remains of the enclosure;
- to ascertain whether this is indeed the site of Raitts Chapel.

The specific objectives are:

- to produce a detailed plan of the enclosure, its contents and the surrounding topography and modern features;
- to characterise through trial excavation the structural elements visible as surface remains;
- to locate and record *in situ* a sample of any burials within the enclosure.

5.0 Methodology

In order to produce a detailed plan of the chapel site, a topographic survey of the area will be carried out using a total station, with data logged electronically. The survey will encompass the visible remains of the enclosure and the possible structure inside it and will also record the topography of the field in which it sits. Modern features, such as the line of the public road to the south and of the A9 to the north, will also be included to help position the site within its modern context.

Survey data will be downloaded to Liscad, a surveying software package, for initial processing and production of a contour model, and then exported to

Autocad for final map production. In addition, the points taken will be plotted and used to draw a hachure plan of the site in the field.

In order to establish whether this monument is the site of Raitts Chapel and characterise the visible remains, several small trial trenches will be excavated by hand across areas of the site deemed to be the most potentially informative. One slot trench will be excavated across the bank defining the northern side of the enclosure. Another will be excavated across one end of the possible sunken structure inside the enclosure. Up to two more small trenches will be opened in the interior, to establish the presence or absence of burials.

Trenches will be excavated to the first archaeological horizon or the undisturbed subsoil, whichever appears first. Deposits exposed will be recorded in plan by colour slide, colour print and monochrome print photography, measured drawing at a scale of 1:20 and written description. A sample of features and deposits will be excavated in order to characterise them, determine the depth of deposits and if possible establish their date. Sections will be recorded by measured drawing at a scale of 1:10, photographs as above and written description.

If burials of human remains are uncovered during the excavations, these will be recorded *in situ* using photography, measured drawing and burial recording forms. If possible, age and sex of individuals will be determined during recording, but any *in situ* burials will be left in place. Any disarticulated human bone encountered during the excavations will be removed for post-excavation analysis.

6.0 *Products of the Proposed Fieldwork*

The products of the fieldwork will include an illustrated data structure report detailing the findings of the survey and trial trenching and assessing the potential for further work at the site. A note will also be submitted to *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland* on the fieldwork results. These will be produced within four months of completion of fieldwork.

Copies of the report will be deposited with the Sites and Monuments Record at Highland Council and the National Monuments Record.

7.0 *Bibliography*

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