Portmahomack: The Tarbat Discovery Programme

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Even before the excavations of 1997-2007 by Martin Carver, it was clear that the site around the church at Tarbat was special. Aerial photographs had revealed an enclosure, various sculptural fragments had been discovered, burials were dotted nearby and a Viking hoard dating to c. 1000 had been discovered in the wall of the church. The research programme led by Martin Carver allowed the church and some of the surrounding area to be investigated, and benefitted from time and resources.

The project is a good example of approaching a topic with research questions, then carefully planning activities to answer them. It was not just an academic exercise, and involved a large number of people in the community. The results were presented to the public in timely fashion, various popular leaflets and publications published while post-excavation activity was underway, and the impressive final volume (Carver et al 2016); objects were installed at the converted and renovated church even while activity still was being undertaken. A variety of scientific and post-excavation analysis was carried out, including isotope and osteological analysis on the skeletal material.

The prehistoric evidence of the site consisted of a few finds including Neolithic and Bronze-Age arrowheads, a carved stone ball, evidence of lithic working, trough querns, and two Iron Age charcoal burning pits.

The main activity on the site dates from the mid 6th century onwards. In Period 1, mid 6th to the later 7th century, a secular high status society is suggested. The evidence includes some burials, many in cists, in a cemetery under the present church and on the crest to the south, a building with evidence of metalworking, and water management in the landscape. Good evidence was obtained for cultivation and metalworking technology.

Around 700 a new focus emerged on the site. The cemetery continued to be used, but now only for men, and many in graves with head boxes; a number were not local in origin. An area of industrial activity was investigated showing stone carving, metalworking, glass working and processing of hides and production of parchment. The economy changed from cultivation to dependence on animals, particularly cattle. Extensive waterworks were engineered and a well built road. Taken together the evidence suggests a monastic institution.

Around 800 a disastrous raid occurred, burning part of the site, and resulting in a large amount of sculpture being destroyed. In the aftermath, these fragments were used to level up the ground. This is of course the time when Viking raiders were known to have attacked a number of sites in the British Isles, and they are the likely culprits.

Shortly after the raid, the damage was tidied. A few burials continued in the cemetery, and there was new metalworking and glass working the industrial area, but this time manufacturing different objects, arguably for a more secular customers rather than the ecclesiastical focus of the monastic period. This industrial activity appears to have faded by c. 900. Moulds possibly for lead weights, suggest the possibility of participation in a weight metal economy. There is again evidence of nearby cultivation, and one of the surviving craft workshops from the monastic period was converted to become a grain kiln.

In Period 4 (c. 1100- c. 1600), the site arguably developed from a large farm to a Medieval township. A stone church was built, requiring the earlier cemetery to be levelled; later modifications and rebuildings can also be traced. Previous buildings were cleared away, the area given over to cultivation, although meat was still important to the inhabitants. The workshop areas became used for domestic structures and then in the 15th/16th centuries for ironworking.

The site is important for many reasons. It provides valuable detailed evidence for the Early Medieval and Medieval periods in the Highlands, periods for which we have limited evidence. The sequence of events is well dated. The burial evidence gives insight into diet and mobility. The industrial evidence is of national importance: the glass working debris is the most extensive for the Scottish Medieval period. The excellent publication allows this information to be assessed and assimilated, and is a model post-excavation publication; it is available on-line making the information accessible to all.

Further information

Carver, Martin, Garner-Lahire, Justin, and Spall, Cecily 2016 *Portmahomack on Tarbat Ness. Changing ideologies in north-east Scotland, sixth to sixteenth century AD*, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland: Edinburgh. Available online at http://books.socantscot.org/digital-books