

SGÒR NAM BAN-NAOMHA ('CLIFF OF THE HOLY WOMEN')  
ISLE OF CANNA

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These descriptive notes and the accompanying sketch-plan (Fig. 1: made by Messrs S. Scott and A. Leith) were prepared during a brief visit paid to Canna by members of the staff of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland in June 1973. They are designed to supplement the account prepared by the Commission in 1925 (1) and to question some of the conclusions there drawn, but are not put forward as a definitive re-assessment of a site presenting many unusual and puzzling features.

It seems likely that the visible remains, all of which are of dry-stone construction, belong to two main periods of occupation. In addition to the enclosure wall, some 5 ft in thickness, the following structures probably belong to the first period. F, a circular building of massive construction measuring some 15 ft in diameter within walls 4 ft 3 in in thickness. A small porch or outshot has subsequently been constructed on the W side, enclosing the original entrance. The function of this building is uncertain and there is little evidence to indicate whether or not it was roofed. Structures of comparable plan on well-attested monastic sites include the beehive hut known as the Schoolhouse (13 ft in diameter) at Innismurray (2), and the very much larger 'Devil's Cauldron' at Kingarth, Bute (32 ft in diameter) (3). E, a well-house, which has recently been cleaned out, revealing a small fresh-water spring. The water from this spring flows underground to reappear in Building H. J, a substantially constructed building abutting the inner face of the enclosure wall and measuring about 7 ft square within walls 4 ft in thickness. There is an entrance in the NE wall. A culvert, now dry, appears to pass directly beneath the building, entering at a point close to the W corner, passing beneath the entrance and thence continuing underground to join the water-course leading from the well-house to Building H. The water seems to have been collected within a dam situated immediately to the NW of the enclosure wall, through which it was conducted by means of a channel spanned by large stone lintels. The entrance to this channel is clearly visible. This building may probably be identified either as a horizontal water-mill, of a pattern well known throughout the Western and Northern

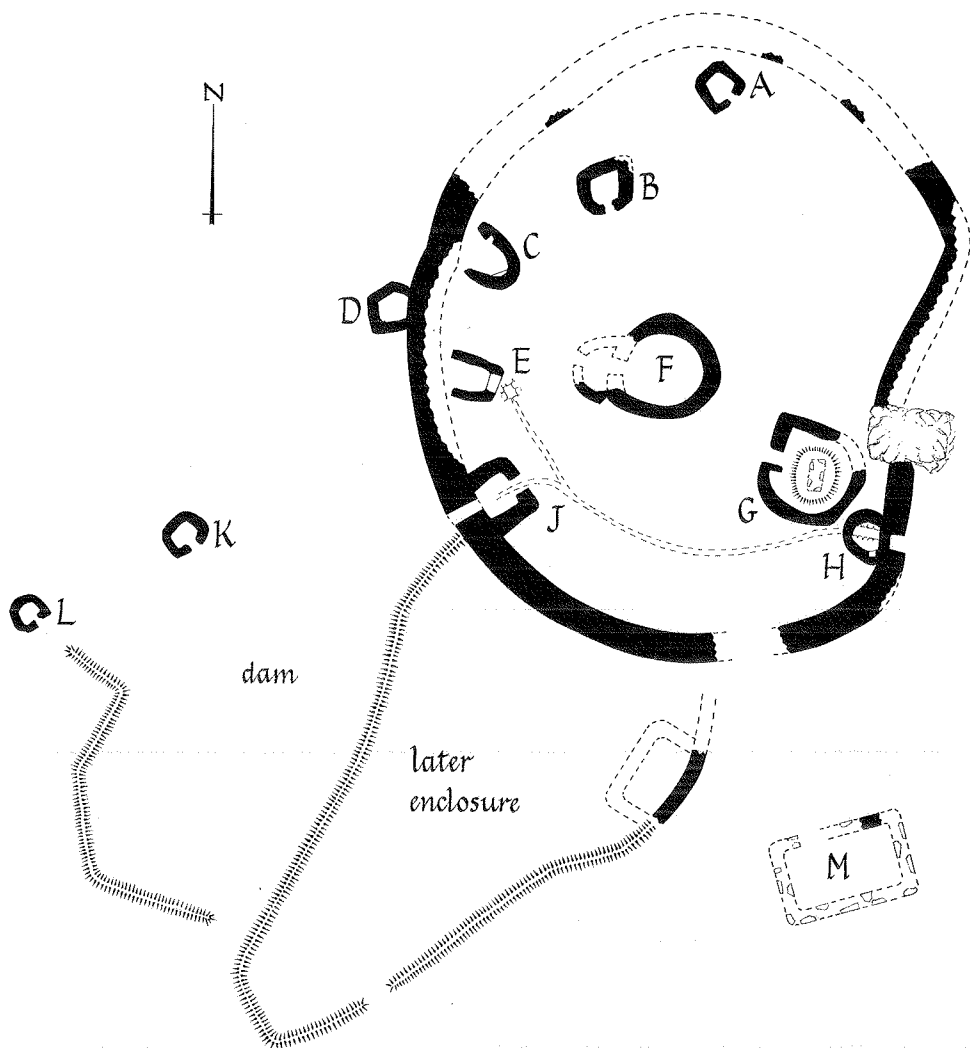


Figure 1. Sgòr nam Ban-Naomha, Canna (Inverness-shire).

Isles (4), or as a bath-house of Irish type (5).

G, a D-shaped structure measuring about 22 ft over all in each direction and having an entrance in the W wall. The central area is defined by a series of thin stone slabs set edgeways in the ground to form a low platform of oval plan somewhat resembling a hearth. Upon the platform there lies a heap of smooth round stones forming a low cairn. Up to at least as late as 1899 the platform was occupied by a small oblong building roofed with flagstones, having an entrance on the W side. This was known as 'The Altar' being the receptacle for votive offerings made by islanders who formerly resorted to the site for prayer and healing (6). In commenting on Somerville's report of 1899 Dr Joseph Anderson identified this building as a well-house (7), but he does not appear to have visited the site himself, and was evidently unaware of the existence of the neighbouring and undisputed well-house (E). Another possibility, although one for which Scottish parallels cannot be quoted, is that the building originally functioned as a sweat-house or hot-air bath of Irish type. Certainly the building illustrated by Somerville bears a close superficial resemblance to recorded examples of sweat-houses at Innismurray and elsewhere (8).

H, a small building of oval plan measuring about 10 ft over all in each direction and abutting the inner face of the enclosure wall. The water-course leading from buildings E and J runs beneath the floor within a well-constructed stone-lined channel some 1 ft 4 in in width, and then passes beneath the enclosure wall to debouch upon the rocky cliffs of the adjacent foreshore. This building was identified in the Commission's report as a horizontal water-mill, but the channel appears to be too narrow to accommodate a horizontal wheel, nor is there sufficient fall of water to provide the downward thrust usually contrived in mills of this type. The building looks, in fact, very like a small-scale version of a mediaeval monastic reredorter, and may have served the same purpose. Another possibility is that it was some sort of bath-house, but the depth of the channel beneath floor-level would make flooding difficult.

Among the buildings that seem likely to be of secondary construction mention may be made of six hut-circles, three of which (A, B and C) lie within the enclosure, and the remainder (D, K and L) just outside the NW sector. These may be the 'leaba crabhach', or stone beds, within which the sick are said to have lain overnight in expectation of cure (9). M, an oblong building lying just outside the entrance to the enclosure and measuring about 24 ft from NE to SW by 14 ft transversely within walls some 2 ft 9 in in thickness. Between this building and the dam there is an irregular-

shaped enclosure of secondary construction which abuts the S sector of the main enclosure wall.

The most remarkable feature of the site is the sophisticated nature of the water-supply system, which alone makes credible the suggested identification of some of the buildings as bath-houses. The popularity of physic wells is amply attested throughout Scotland, and particularly in the Highlands, up to at least as late as the 19th century, although bath-houses and sweat-houses of Irish type have not hitherto been identified in Scotland. A number of Scottish wells did, however, incorporate bathing-pools (10), while Martin's account of the island of Skye includes a reference to the bathing of hands and feet in water heated by the quenching of stones made redhot in a fire (11). An alternative explanation of the structures on Canna, involving the utilization of the water supply entirely for domestic and industrial purposes seems less probable in view of the traditional therapeutic association of the site, its remoteness and its marked dissimilarity to the earliest surviving remains of West Highland townships. Moreover, the incorporation of the culvert within the footings of the enclosure wall indicates either that the water system was an original feature of the construction, or that the wall was substantially rebuilt following its introduction. It is, of course, the character of the enclosure wall that invites a comparison between Sgòr nam Ban-naomha and the few ecclesiastical cashels so far identified in Scotland (12), for other similarities are not readily apparent. Clearly the site merits more than a cursory examination of the surface remains, and further investigation, preferably by archaeological excavation, is desirable both to determine the function of the various structures described in this report and to obtain evidence bearing on their assumed monastic origin.

The authors are indebted to Dr J. L. Campbell, the proprietor of Canna, for permission to visit the site, and to the Commissioners for their permission to make free use of the survey report in the compilation of this paper. The illustration is Crown Copyright.

### References

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