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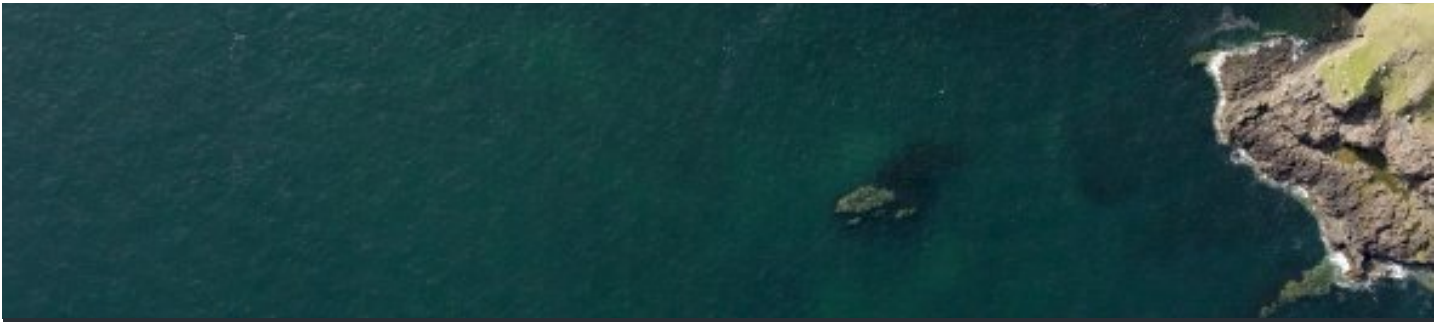
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S e t t l e m e n t , C a n n a – S m a l l I s l e s ,
H i g h l a n d



The Cliff of the Holy Women

Tucked below the steep scree slopes and basalt cliffs towards the southwest end of Canna, the most westerly of the Small Isles, lies an oval enclosure long believed to be of early Christian origin. The placename – Sgorr nam Ban-naomha – translates as the 'cliff of the holy women' and there is little doubt that the location of this enclosure is as dramatic as it is isolated.

The site occupies a remote, rock-bound coastal terrace and is best approached by foot from the northeast along a narrow eroded path that descends steeply through the scree slopes. With no obvious landing place for a boat, the terrace could only ever have been reached from the sea in fair weather and under calm conditions. On account of both its isolated location and its inaccessibility, scholars have suggested that this may have been a hermitage associated with an early Christian church that once overlooked Canna Harbour at the east end of the island.

The enclosure is bounded by a thick drystone wall and has a circular structure of unknown function at its centre. On the northwest, where the wall rises to meet the base of the scree slopes, there are the remains of a number of small huts or platforms. These have been interpreted as stone beds known as leaba crabnach, 'sacred couches', used by pilgrims as resting places when they sought cures to their ailments. Another feature within the interior is thought to be the remains of an altar. This survives today as a collection of loose slabs and rounded pebbles bounded by a rectangular kerb and contained within a D-shaped structure located in the southeast quadrant of the enclosure. It was amongst these stones that Ian Fisher of RCAHMS first discovered fragments of three carved stones all inscribed with traces of early Christian crosses. Found during the course of field survey in 1994, these added to the remarkable collection of early Christian sculptured stones already known from Canna, the majority of which had been found in the vicinity of the free-standing cross that still stands at A'Chill near the harbour. On the terrace outside the main enclosure, and closer to the rocky coastal edge, there are the footings of a small rectangular building, possibly a chapel, with an entrance opening inland to the north.





Now or never

So it was a year later, on the final morning of our field survey of the island in 1995, that I had the opportunity to accompany two colleagues to visit this site. Never having had a particularly good head for heights, this was an occasion filled with fear and excitement in equal measure. With the realisation that it was now or never, I took up the challenge and was rewarded with a first-hand experience of visiting the site with my boots firmly on the ground. With the watchful eye of a sea-eagle soaring above, I could appreciate the sanctity of the location and it is one site visit I shall never forget.

References:

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<https://canmore.org.uk/site/10766/canna-sgorr-nam-ban-naomha>
<https://canmore.org.uk/site/10694/canna-a-chill-st-columbas-chapel>
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