

Rethinking water as an inherent boundary in the early medieval west of Scotland

Abstract

The modern perception of land-focused travel is here challenged with the intention of prioritising water-based travel within a perceived seascape that would have been the focus of transportation in the early medieval period. This is done by first addressing the history of roads in Scotland before examining texts that indicate how early medieval peoples conceived of travel in the west of Scotland. Further evidence of travel in texts and archaeology are examined before turning to look at the specific groups of Dál Riata, the Community of Comgall, and the important position of the isle of Tiree. The seascape within which these entities existed is thereby described and highlighted.

Keywords: medieval, travel, seascape, landscape, monastic, Scotland, Ireland

Introduction

In the modern period we are more comfortable with travel by paved road, train, or even air than we are with travel by boat. Modern political boundaries also entrench this view of the sea as a boundary in the west of Scotland. However, shifting the perspective from land-focused to sea-focused travel enables a closer examination of the actual experience of medieval travellers in the west of Scotland. We begin with a brief overview of the development of roads in Scotland before turning to the evidence for sea-based travel in the early medieval period through both archaeological and textual sources, especially the annals and hagiographical works that include the *Lives* of Comgall (VCom), Cainnech (VCain), Columba (VC), Baithéne (VBaith), and Brendan (VBren). Then, we will look at two communities which appear to have existed across the North Channel, one secular and one ecclesiastical: the Dál Riata and the Community of Comgall, respectively. Finally, we will conclude our examination of the seascape within which early medieval peoples in the west of Scotland interacted by looking at the island of Tiree and its associations with early medieval ecclesiastical foundations and saints in both Ireland and Scotland.

Roads in Scotland

The history of roads in Scotland serves as evidence of the changing conception of central and peripheral space in Scotland. This is especially seen in the modern development of land-based transportation and the conceptualisation of the Central Belt as the centre of Scotland, with the highlands and islands now considered peripheral. This is not to suggest that there were no roads prior to the modern period, but that roads as we understand them today, and the ease of travel that comes with them, are fairly recent.

Travel routes would have existed throughout Scotland from pre-historic times, but these were far from the smooth paved roads we are familiar with today and which are easily traversed in most weather conditions. The limit of Rome's occupied territory extended only so far as the Antonine Wall, which stretches between the Firth of Clyde and Firth of Forth, and was in active use for up to 20 years (MacInnes 2020, p.53). A road known as the Military Way was constructed as part of the Antonine Wall (Hanson and Breeze 2020, p.13-14), though one should not expect Roman roads to have been constructed beyond this point and certainly not to the north and west of the Firth of Clyde. A possible early medieval route across Scotland (stretching from Dunkeld in the east to Iona in the west) was suggested by Pamela O'Neill in 2005 and tested in 2017, which itself wends through Strath Tay, along Glen Lyon, and then crosses the Spine of Britain (O'Neill 2017, p.211-225).

Drove roads were recorded by A.R.B. Haldane (1952) which existed into the late eighteenth century, and likely follow routes determined far earlier. Looking in the west of Scotland specifically, we see that there were only a few routes through the western mainland towards markets in the Central Belt (Matthew, [Map]), highlighting 'the few difficult routes available for land-based travel towards markets' (McNamara 2021, p.196).

Roads of a quality beginning to approach what we might consider easily traversed in our modern perception truly begin with the military roads of George Wade, a man whose name is intrinsically linked with roadworks in the Highlands, and whose work started in 1725 (Miller 2019, p.45-55). These roads were predominantly built east of the Great Glen, though Wade's successors did manage to tie Glenelg and Oban into the main system, and linked Poolewe to Contin (Miller 2019, p.58). Modern roads have made travel across Scotland far more efficient and comfortable than ever before. Today it is possible to reach Inverness from Perth in two-and-a-quarter hours according to Google Maps. This is a far cry from the two-and-a-quarter days to complete the trip after the construction of the military roads, which themselves halved the time to take the same journey prior to their construction (Miller 2019, p.105). Applecross, an early monastic settlement on the western coast of Scotland, survives today as a village and serves as an excellent example

of modern changes to the orientation of travel. The drove road near Applecross, which rises over the rough and rocky territory of *Bealach na Bà* or ‘pass of the cow’, was first turned into a modern road c. 1826 and provided the first road to connect the area with the rest of the Scottish mainland (McNamara 2021, p.175).

Our current expectation that islands should themselves be counted as a bounded unit is likely rooted in the modern or Western psyche, serving as a lens that affects our understanding of the past (McNamara 2021, p.42-43). Indeed, topography and other circumstances which inhibit overland travel can cause islands to experience cultural division within their own landed boundaries:

Their choice of route and method of travel would consider destination, labour cost, difficulty of terrain, and other factors. The possibility of rugged or difficult interior terrain may cause the coasts of adjacent islands to be considered closer or more accessible than the other side of the same island, arguing against island homogeneity and for the idea that the social or cultural line can be drawn through an island, not just around it (McNamara 2021, p.43).

Understanding that the present conception of islands and water-as-boundary is more recently constructed allows us to more clearly focus our analysis of early medieval evidence and thus better understand how this would have been conceptualised by those who lived during that time.

Evidence for Early Medieval Travel

The historical record is a useful beginning point to look at movement across water in the early medieval period. As early as the sixth century, Gildas mentioned ‘two savage overseas nations, the Scots from the northwest and the Picts from the north’ whom in their ‘coracles that had carried them across the sea-valleys’ had taken control of the entirety of the north of Britain (Gildas, §14-17). In this period *Scoti* was a Latin (L) term that referred to Gaelic speakers generally, whether in Ireland or Scotland (Fraser 2010, p.43). While Gildas’ writing outlines a pseudo-historical view of a migration of Picts and Gaels from outside the island of Britain, there is still value in his belief that such a migration by boat was possible. That tells us that sea-based travel was familiar and accessible to Gildas. In the eighth century, the Northumbrian monk Bede further described how the sons of King Aethelfrith of Bernicia ‘together with many young nobles, were living in exile among the Irish or the Picts’, which could suggest that these sons had travelled across the sea to Ireland (Bede, III.1; McNamara 2021, p.46). Adomnán (d. 704), ninth abbot of Iona, described a ‘widely travelled community of Columba that spreads from Ireland to Iona, Hinba, Ardnamurchan, *Mag Luinge*, and even to Skye’ (McNamara 2021, p.46). In the early ninth century, Dícuil (fl. 795-825) described his own experiences with the islands in the north Atlantic:

There are islands around our own island Hibernia, some small and some very small. Near the island Britannia are many islands, some large, some small, and some medium-sized. Some are in the sea to her south and some in the sea to her west, but they abound mostly to the north-west and north. Among these I have lived in some, and have visited others; some I have only glimpsed, while others I have read about.

Circum nostram insulam Hiberniam sunt insulae; sed aliae parvae, atque aliae minimae. Juxta insulam Britanniam multae aliae magnae, aliae, parvae, aliaeque mediae sunt, aliae in Australi mari et aliae in Occidentali; sed magis in parte circii

et septentrionis illius abundant. In aliquibus ipsarum habitavi, alias intravi, alias tantum vidi, alias legi (Dícuil, VII, ¶6).

In addition to these sources, evidence of water-based travel is also found in the Irish annals. The annals themselves are generally short-form reports of current events in chronological order that were kept at a monastery and are generally agreed to have become contemporary with recorded events between the mid-sixth century and the late-seventh century (McNamara 2021, p.52-53). Just looking at the *Annals of Ulster* (AU) and the *Annals of Tigernach* (AT) between AD 650 to 750 we note that just over 3% of all entries either directly mention water-based travel or must have necessarily involved it (such as travel between Britain and Ireland). While this number appears low, it is not intended to suggest that this percentage of entries indicates all water-based travel in the annals, as many trips which both begin and end in Ireland (or Britain, for that matter), could have involved water-based travel which was not mentioned in the annals. Therefore, this is an absolute minimum number of entries for water-based travel in these two annals. Indeed, these are only records of the events that were considered important enough to be included in the annalistic record. Any unexceptional uses of water-based travel would not be included in a record of significant events. The reasons for such water-based travel include monastic ventures (for example: an abbot making a circuit themselves or the relics of a saint being taken on circuit), secular military actions (such as the sea-battle mentioned in AU 719.7 and AT 719.5), the flight of conquered kings (such as Aurthuile's flight to Britain in AU 700.5), and even general shipwrecks due to foul weather (which caused the drowning of six of the Community of Iona in AU 691.5 or the wreck of 150 Pictish vessels in AT 729.2). Based on this textual evidence, we can surmise that water-based travel in early medieval Ireland and Scotland was commonplace.

Indeed, the traditional argument for a migration of Gaelic speakers from Ireland to northern Britain has been at least partially built upon a record in the Irish annals:

AT 501.3: Fergus Mór son of Erc with the people of Dál Riata, possessed a part of Britain and died there.

AT 501.3: *Feargus Mor mac Earca cum gente Dal Riada partem Britanniae tenuit, et ibi mortuus est.*

However, as noted above, this entry is not contemporary with the timeframe it purports to record and is accepted today as a much later insertion (Campbell 2001, p.288; McNamara 2021, p.23). Bede described the migration of peoples from Ireland to northern Britain as occurring under the leadership of one Reuda, who 'won lands among the Picts either by friendly treaty or by the sword', from whom he claims their name, Dál Riata, comes (Bede, I.1). Much like the Irish annals, Bede's explanation of the origins of Gaelic speakers in northern Britain is later, and we should not accept his story at face value. These stories are more likely to represent what the original author wanted to portray as true at the time of its composition (Fraser 2010, p.145).

Moving from the historical documents themselves, modern researchers have included additional evidence in their search for the early history of the west of Scotland. Indeed, we must now consider the high probability of mutual development across the north of Ireland and west of Scotland. This was spotlighted by Ewan Campbell, whose challenge to the traditional view of an early sixth-century migration to modern Argyll was also based on archaeological and linguistic evidence, upon which scholars have subsequently built, and which is reviewed briefly here. Campbell noted that:

[a]t best, the evidence shows a shared cultural region from the Iron Age, with some subsequent divergence in the later 1st millennium AD. Any cultural influences could be argued as likely to have been going from Scotland to Ireland rather than *vice versa* (Campbell 2001, p.287).

The archaeological record, as it is currently understood, contains no evidence for a sixth-century migration. Both Campbell and Dumville note a continuity of the archaeological record (Dumville 2002, p.195), especially in the use of the hilltop dun as a settlement form from the first millennium BC to the advent of the Viking Age (Campbell 2001, p.287).

The hilltop dun is a distinct settlement form in northern Britain, as brochs and forts of other types are found elsewhere in Scotland and are similarly distinct from the raths and cashels which proliferate in Ireland (Campbell 2001, p.287). Moving to a different type of archaeological evidence, the form of brooches in the fourth to sixth centuries in the west of Scotland (type G penannular) and Ireland (zoomorphic penannular) likewise does not align between these two areas (Campbell 2001, p.287). It would be expected that an archaeological link between Ireland and the west of Scotland would be visible in the event of a migration, as that would involve a marked and rapid cultural shift. Further analysis of the physical evidence for cross-channel travel has been undertaken by Pamela O'Neill, with special attention paid to the possible use of cross-marked stones as water-focused travel markers (O'Neill 2005).

Traditionally, it was accepted that the migration of Goidelic speakers from Ireland to north Britain completely displaced the earlier Brythonic speakers, though Campbell again notes that the 'complete obliteration' of a prior language without evidence of a population movement 'would be almost unparalleled in onomastic history' (Campbell 2001, p.289). Problems with Ptolemy's recorded names include the possibility that his informant provided Brythonic forms of Goidelic names, or that the divergence of the languages was less developed in that time (Campbell 2001, p.289). There was a group of people known as *Cruithin* (later *Dál nAraide*) in the north of Ireland, who were Goidelic speakers; this is the same name by which later Irish annalists referred to the Picts (Woolf 2012, p.7). This suggests linguistic overlap between the north of Britain and the north of Ireland from an early period. If we accept that the North Channel zone was an area of connection and movement of peoples, then we must accept the movement and development of language in that area as well. As Thomas Clancy notes, '[l]anguages are not afraid of the water' (2011, p.357), and what we perceive today as the separate geographical and political units of Ireland and Scotland did not necessarily exist in the Iron Age and early medieval period. Rather, it is more likely that the Grampian Highlands, also known in Scottish Gaelic as *Druim nAlban* or the 'Spine of Britain', would be more likely to cause a communication barrier than the North Channel. Indeed, Adomnán himself wrote that the Picts and the Irish in Britain were two 'races separated by the mountains of *Druim Alban*' (VC II.46). The speed of travel overland versus by boat is markedly different, with early medieval boats able to cover a distance upwards of 90km each day in good weather (McNamara 2021, p.197). In contrast, Pamela O'Neill, along with Simon Taylor and others, planned a walk from Dunkeld to Iona in 2017 in an attempt to reconstruct possible routes of travel for ecclesiastical members of the Community of Columba (O'Neill 2017). O'Neill's reconstruction posited a 12 to 15km per day distance, which would have allowed for the performance of religious duties as well as the time needed to cross steep or boggy ground (and sometimes ground which is both at once) (O'Neill 2017, p.213). Secular travellers may have been able to make some greater headway, presuming that they did not need to stop during the day for religious observances, though they would still have had to manage the same ground conditions.

Cross-Channel Communities and Politics

Multiple groups appear to have traversed and existed on both sides of the North Channel in the early medieval period, though only two, the Dál Riata and the Community of Comgall, will be thoroughly discussed here. The island of Tiree will also be briefly addressed as an important location within the North Channel seascape during the early medieval period.

Dál Riata was a secular polity that is evidenced in the annals, hagiographies, and other textual sources such as the ‘Statement of the History of the Men of Scotland’, better known in its Early Gaelic (EG) form as *Míniugud Senchasa Fher nAlban* (Dumville 2002; Bannerman 1966). The Community of Comgall was an ecclesiastical community based around its founder, Comgall, and his primary monastery at Bangor in modern County Down (McNamara 2021, p.123-130). The island of Tiree is the westernmost island in the Inner Hebrides and appears to have served as an important location within the early medieval ecclesiastical world of the west of Scotland.

In Ireland, Dál Riata held lands in the north-east (modern County Antrim), including land east of the River Bush and north of Glenarm (Charles-Edwards 2000, p.54; McNamara 2021, p.82). On the other side of North Channel, Dalriadic lands included much of modern-day Argyll (Fraser 2010, p.251). The continued existence of Dál Riata is indicated in its mention as part of the Convention of Druim Cete c. 592, which may have dealt with an alliance between Dál Riata and Uí Néill in Ireland (Fraser 2007, p.318-321; Fraser 2010, p.139). Irish Dál Riata seems to have been subjected to Uí Néill influence after the Battle of Mag Roth c. 637 (Charles-Edwards 2000, p.494-499), though entries referring to Irish Dál Riata continue to be found in the *Annals of the Four Masters* (AFM) 910.3, 985.8, 1005.8, 1012.13, 1165.4, and 1247.4 (Dumville 2002, p.196). Dál Riata in Argyll continued to exist despite coming under Pictish influence c.741, through the onset of the Viking Age, and eventually changed focus eastwards towards Pictland from the ninth century (McNamara 2021, p.166-170, 269-274, 278-281). It is unclear exactly when Dál Riata split into separate polities in Ireland and Argyll, though it seems clearer that by the ninth century this was the case (Dumville 2002, p.196; McNamara 2021, p.270-272). This split, however, seems less based on issues arising from the sea than it does the polity being subjected to the influence of their neighbours.

The Community of Comgall was an ecclesiastical group focused on St Comgall and centred on his primary foundation at Bangor in modern County Down. Before diving straight into a discussion of this Community, it is useful to first examine what exactly is meant by ‘Community’ and how this differs from other terms used to define ecclesiastical groupings in early medieval Ireland and Scotland: *paruchia* and *familia* or ‘family’. Understanding these terms helps to show the organisational structures that underly their usage and assists in showing the connections that existed between disparate members of a *paruchia*, *familia*, or Community which could have stretched long distances and through seascapes. Traditionally, *paruchia* was understood to be based upon a bishop who was resident in a monastery, and the geographical area assigned to him which was subsequently overtaken by a head abbot who claimed authority over dependent foundations which said abbot controlled as his *paruchia* (McNamara 2021, p.14). This understanding was subsequently challenged by Kathleen Hughes, though she still identified the bishop as the main authority within a *paruchia* of ‘scattered houses’ with increased control by an abbot after AD 549 (McNamara 2021, p.15; Hughes 1966, p.x, 50, 62-71, 77-90). This perception was further challenged by Richard Sharpe, who argued for the continuing existence of evidence for administrative power by bishops even into the eighth century (Sharpe 1984, p.237; McNamara 2021, p.16-17). His ultimate position was that the hierarchy for bishops was similar to that observed for local secular rulers (*rí* ‘king’, *rurí* ‘over-king’, *ard-rí* ‘high king’), and that the monastic *paruchia* was a separate entity from the episcopal *paruchia*, in that it made a proprietary claim over dependent foundations rather than one of episcopal jurisdiction (McNamara 2021, p.16-17; Sharpe 1984, p.244). While there was a concept of the *paruchia Patricii* ‘the family of Patrick’ in the *Book of Armagh*, it is also noteworthy

that the Community of Iona described itself as *familia Iae* ‘the family of Iona’ rather than as a *paruchia* (Sharpe 1984, p.244-245), as seen at AU 691.5 717.4, 749.7, 806.8, and 817.7. This indicates that there were additional options for how communities centred on a founding saint and monastery might conceptualise themselves. This understanding further suggests the existence of a lay monastic sphere which focused on its own members and worked underneath the authority of a bishop (McNamara 2021, p.17). Most recently, *paruchia* has been re-examined by Colmán Etchingham, who determined *paruchia* to refer to an episcopal sphere of jurisdiction with a geographical-based authority that did not have to be contiguous. Separate from this jurisdiction, he examined four different types of relationships that could exist between head and dependent foundations: *eclais fine érlama* ‘church of the founding/patron saint’s kin’, *eclais fine griain* ‘church of the landowner’s kin’, *cell manach* ‘church of the *manaig*’, and *déorad Dé* ‘pious outsider’, though due to space we will not delve any further into their particulars (Etchingham 1993, p.153-157). The use of ‘Community’ as a term here is separate from *paruchia* in that there is no requirement of episcopal involvement, and consciously separate from *familia*, which has been noted to refer variously to the community of a single foundation and also to a wider connected group that can in many ways overlap that which constitutes the *paruchia* (Etchingham 1999, p.126-130). Community as it is used in this paper follows that laid out in the author’s doctoral thesis, which is defined as

a group of people who have a shared characteristic (such as an ideology or way of life) in common or some sense of cultural sharing or belonging together (McNamara 2021, p.18-19).

Comgall’s Community can be shown to include foundations in the north of Ireland as well as the west of Scotland. Perhaps the most concrete of these examples are those successors of Comgall at Bangor who are explicitly noted as coming from other foundations. These include two successors who were noted to have come from Antrim (an ecclesiastical foundation on Loch Neagh in Ireland): Fintan of Antrim, whose death is recorded in AU 613.1 and Flann of Antrim, whose death is recorded in AU 728.3. A third successor was noted as coming from Applecross, an ecclesiastical foundation on the western coast of Scotland opposite the Isle of Skye (in modern Ross and Cromarty) called Mac Óige of Applecross, whose death is recorded in AU 802.5.

Antrim was further connected with Comgall in the annals following an attack by ‘heathens’ in AU 824.2, when the relics of Comgall were taken to Antrim for safekeeping (McNamara 2021, p.125). Other sites in Ireland which have been associated with Comgall include Camus, near Coleraine, which Adomnán specifically connects to Comgall in his *Life* of St Columba (VC I.49); *Rechru* (which is likely a reference to Rathlin Island), which is mentioned in Comgall’s *Life* (VCom §50); Castledermot (EG *Dísert Diarmata*), in modern County Kildare was noted as ‘one of Comgall’s places’ in the *Fragmentary Annals* (FA) c.908 in FA 423. Moving eastwards across the North Channel, the strongest association with Comgall is at Applecross. Lismore (EG *Lios mór*), on an island of the same name in Loch Linnhe off the western coast of Scotland, is also sometimes connected to Comgall, though this connection is very tenuous (McNamara 2021, p.282-283). Comgall’s *Life* also places him at a foundation on Tiree (L *Heth*) c. 562 (VCom §22), an island which will get more attention below. Comgall is further claimed to have travelled in the north of Britain in his own *Life* (VCom §13, 51) as well as in the *Life* of St Columba (VC III.17). The sixteenth-century *Aberdeen Breviary* also associates Comgall with Paisley and its founder, Mirren, though the lateness of this association also makes it tenuous (McNamara 2021, p.129; Macquarrie 2012, p.212-213). As this evidence shows, Comgall’s Community can be evidenced throughout the North Channel seascape.

Having considered the seascape which made up part of the Community of Comgall in a more general sense, we now turn to considering more concrete details about the realities of attempting to travel from a site such as Applecross to the central foundation of Bangor. This projected route underscores the reality of travel between the north of Ireland and the west of Scotland in the early medieval period and the swiftness with which long distances can be traversed by sea. Indeed, the water can be seen to act as a kind of early medieval ‘motorway’ enabling travel and contact across areas viewed today as highly isolated. As mentioned above, it is possible that a ship could have travelled as many as 90km in a day, given good weather. Based on this projection a possible route, including overnighting locations, has been identified which could be traversed in as few as five days (Figure 1).

The route begins at Applecross, with the first day’s travel covering 79km to Arisaig on Loch nan Ceall on the Scottish mainland. Arisaig possesses a sheltering harbour as well as two Maelrubha hagiotoponyms (Maelrubha was the founder of Applecross and possible student of Comgall) (McNamara 2021, p.198). From Arisaig, the second day’s trip would be approximately 70km to the island of Tiree. A possible landing site is at modern Gott Bay, which boasts an easy, sandy beach and is very near one of the sites postulated as *Mag Luinge*, a dependent foundation associated with Iona and St Columba (McNamara 2021, p.318-321). The third destination is Loch Gruinart on Islay, a distance of approximately 77km, near the site of the Kilnave Cross which indicates the area was in use in the early medieval period (McNamara 2021, p.199). Day four reaches Machrihanish Bay, Kintyre, 75km distant, which has a beach attractive for landing boats and sits approximately 2km from Killarow, another Maelrubha hagiotoponym (McNamara 2021, p.199). Finally, the fifth day would cut across the North Channel and wind down the Antrim coast for a distance of 93km to Bangor.



Figure 1. Suggested travel route from Applecross to Bangor (McNamara 2021, p. 198)

The island of Tiree itself is further indicative of the high degree of connectedness that existed between the west of Scotland and the Hebridean islands in the early medieval period. As mentioned above, Tiree is the westernmost island in the Inner Hebrides, and sits conveniently in this western seascape to facilitate travel in all directions. Further, it is the sixth largest island of the Inner Hebrides, with a large proportion of fertile and useful land (McNamara 2021, p.284), making it an even more attractive site. Tiree is mentioned in the *Lives* of Columba, Cainnech, Comgall, Baithéne and the *Vita Altera* 'Alternate Life' of Brendan as *L Heth* or *Ethica* (VC I.19, I.36, II.15, II.39, III.7; VBaith §9; VCom §22; VCain §26; VBren §15). It has also been confidently identified as the location of Iona's dependent foundation of *Mag Luinge*, though the specific location on the island is still less clear (McNamara 2021, p.288, 341-342). What makes Tiree even more interesting is the survival of numerous sites which have associations with the early medieval period, though only three will be discussed here briefly.

Kirkapoll is one of the possible sites for *Mag Luinge*. It is located on modern Gott Bay and has a surviving church and chapel (which date to the fourteenth century), two graveyards, and two incised crosses which stylistically suggest they are much earlier than the church and chapel (McNamara 2021, p.318-321). Soroby, the second possibility for *Mag Luinge*, also sits near a beach, and today consists of a burial ground with two potentially early cross-carved slabs, known as Soroby 1 and Soroby 2. A previously existing church was demolished in the early nineteenth century (Fisher 2001, p.238). Soroby 1 is the stylistically earlier stone, though it cannot be securely dated, and has been compared with similar stones at Monymusk, Lochgoilhead, and Iona (McNamara 2021, p.327). Soroby 2 also shows wide stylistic links as far as *Cille Bharra*; Killevin; Iona; and *Riasg Buidhe*, Colonsay, though the similarity especially to *Cille Bharra* suggests a likely tenth century date (Fisher 2001, p.107, 117, 140, 148; McNamara 2021, p.325-326). *Teampall Phàraig* 'Patrick's temple/church' has a perhaps obvious dedication to Patrick, though it is unclear if this is an enduring dedication or a more recent one. A visual relationship with Iona exists at this site, as Iona can be seen from *Teampall Phàraig* on a clear day. The site today consists of 'an early enclosure with three cross-incised stones, remnants of small huts, and a nearby well', and may indicate a settlement or monastery active in the early medieval period (McNamara 2021, p.333). The carved stones on the site consist of two pillar stones with Sunken Latin crosses on two opposite faces, while the third stone contains a single carved Latin cross. The designs on the stones are very simple, though they are different from the crosses at Kirkapoll, as the width of the carved arms is greater. These stones have stylistic similarity to carved crosses at Iona; Kilmory, Rum; and elsewhere on Tiree (Fisher 2001, p.95, 123, 127, 129; McNamara 2021, 334-335). The stylistic connections seen across Tiree with other parts of the west of Scotland indicate that there was an active movement of people and ideas throughout this seascape as long ago as the early medieval period, continuing right through to the early modern period. As William Reeves has noted, we might not have pinpointed dates for the sites on Tiree, but 'there can be little doubt ... that this island was well known and much frequented at a very early stage of Christianity in Scotland' (1854, p.243). The existence of the Dál Riata, the Community of Comgall, and the volume of likely early medieval sites on Tiree indicates that the west of Scotland and the north of Ireland were part of a well-connected seascape.

Conclusion

The focus has been to confront assumptions on travel based on what feels natural to us today as modern or Western people. This has been undertaken by first examining the history of the development of roads in Scotland, which have served to focus more recent concepts of travel towards land and the Central Belt. With this understanding, it becomes possible to better understand and analyse evidence for the lived experiences of people in the early medieval

period in the west of Scotland. It thus becomes clear that early medieval people such as Adomnán and Dícuil perceived themselves as living in a traversable and familiar seascape. This understanding is further supported by looking at additional evidence in the annals, hagiographies, and the archaeological record. Finally, the existence of the polity of Dál Riata and the Community of Comgall which each spanned the North Channel, and the importance of Tiree in its early medieval seascape come together to ultimately support the view that sea-based travel and seascapes were themselves understood as areas of connection and accessibility in the early medieval period rather than as barriers or hard boundaries.

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