

BEACON HILL—EARLY CHRISTIAN CEMETERY

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The announcement, late in 1968, that Lundy would have to be sold, coupled with the now-averted threat that it might have been bought by unsuitable persons, meant that the excavation had to be planned with some despatch; though the acquisition of the island by the National Trust removed the immediate fear that all archaeological work would end, preparations had all been made and the cemetery was examined this July. Senior students and graduates from the Universities of Edinburgh and Leicester joined members of the L.F.S. in this task.

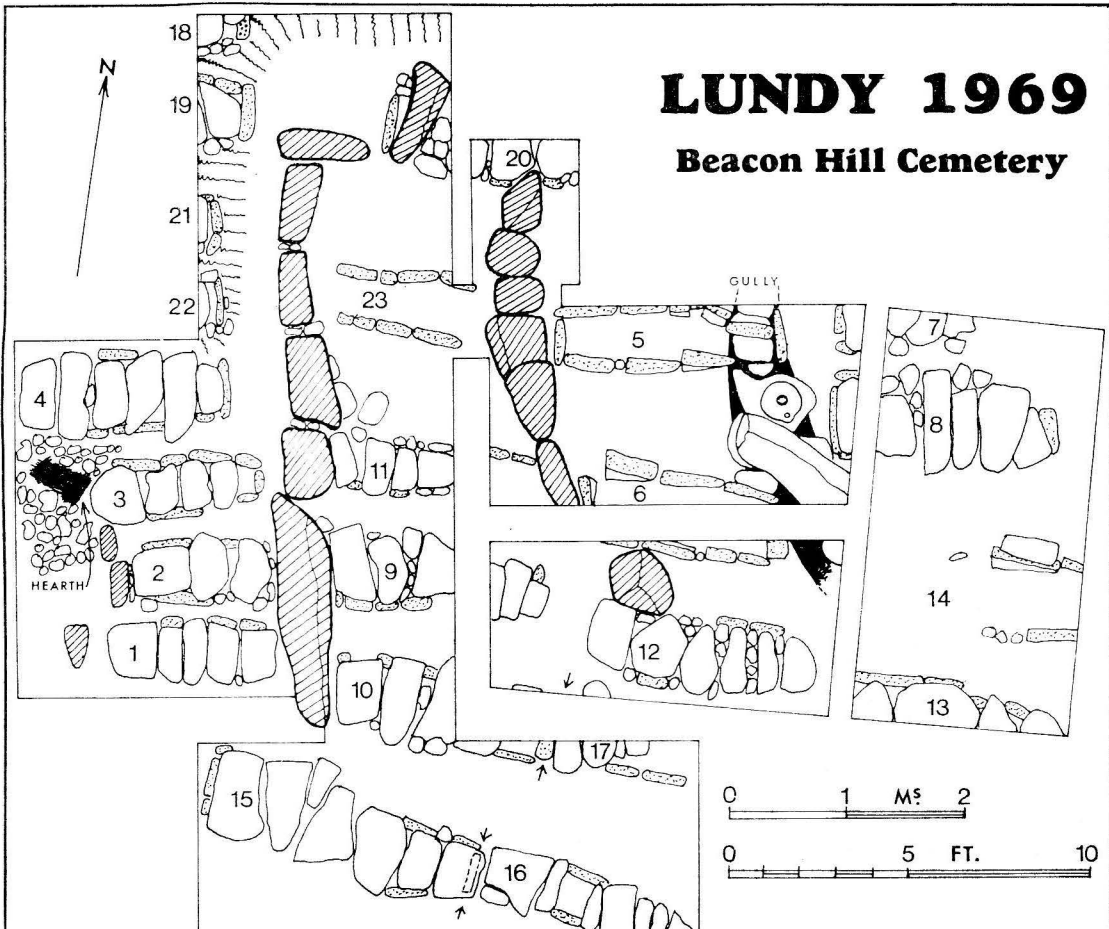
Seen from the top of the Old Light, a ready-made photographic tower, the Beacon Hill burial-ground is an irregular polygon, enclosed by granite walls of the last century and (on the south-west) by a shallow arc of a thick granite-faced bank. In the north-east corner, where modern tombs of the Heavens, Harmans, and earlier islanders are concentrated, the ruins of a small rectangular chapel can be made out. Granite boulders and pillars of varying sizes dot the enclosure, which is fortunately covered only with grass and low bracken.

The sequence of events revealed in digging is of some interest. Beacon Hill is the highest point of the southern half of Lundy, a gently-rounded hill, and previous work had shown that an extensive system of small rectilinear fields, accompanied by circular stone-walls huts, more or less covers the whole area of the summit. Partial excavation of one such hut had produced coarse pottery of Iron Age type (in the south-western sense of 'native Iron Age'—that is, the Early Iron Age proper and the earlier centuries A.D.), and the field-systems have analogies during this period in Wessex and the far south-west. There seems no doubt that the area of the cemetery previously contained at least one hut, was within the field-system, and overlies at least one field lynchet. Abundant pottery finds, which enlarge the Lundy repertoire include not only the coarse wares previously known, but finer wares of the jar and dish forms, and by comparison with recently-investigated sites in Somerset (for instance, Mr. Peter Fowler's at Butcombe) these latter should be dated to the 3rd and 4th centuries A.D. Traces of some sort of hearth, a stretch of a covered drain or water-course, and minor artefacts like utilised beach-pebbles, were associated with a dark occupation layer containing numerous sherds, and could be clearly seen in a number of sections to underlie the graves.

The *prima facie* evidence for any kind of really early Christian burial-ground here is derived from the four inscribed memorial tombstones. Two of these—one reading O/P/TIMI, 'To the best one' and another reading, below a little circle, REST/EUTA (a woman's name—not 'Restitutæ', as given in CA 8, p. 199)—have slightly devolved Roman capitals set horizontally, and emphasised by horizontal lines, on small upright pillars. These need be no later than the beginning of the 6th century A.D. and I should have thought the curious use of 'Optimi' is more at home in the 5th century. The other two stones are larger, and the best-known one, unhappily broken, reads .IGERN—/. . ITIGERN—, the two final I's being on their sides. It can be restored—allowing the first name to be CONTIGERNOS, or VORTIGERNOS—as . . IGERNI FILI TIGERNI, 'The stone of X: of the son of Tigernos'. This formula and the placing of the inscription *down* the stone vertically, are derived from the style of Irish ogham inscriptions, which appear in east Cornwall (in the wake of Irish settlers) at the end of the 5th century. The style of lettering (sickle G, final I on its side) suggest a date nearer 600. The last stone has been read as all sorts of things, 'Tulco', 'Tuloci', and so forth, but if one follows the normal rule, which is to read these vertical inscriptions with one's head cocked over to the *right*, one can see that it has so far been read upside-down. As suspected, the inscription is headed by a linear cross in a circle (a late 6th-century motif) and it reads POTIT (I), 'The Stone of Potitus'. Now we know this name; *Potitus*, a presbyter, was Patrick's own grandfather, as Patrick tells us at the opening of his *Confessio*. The Lundy stone must be a good three hundred years later—after, rather than before, 600, I think—but it is interesting to see the name repeated in an Atlantic Christian context.

LUNDY 1969

Beacon Hill Cemetery



What does all this mean? To start with, inscribed stones still in their original situations are rare anywhere, and here we have no less than four, apparently still in the appropriate cemetery, and dating between the late 5th and early 7th centuries. This must raise the supposition that graves as old as this period lie below the turf, and this is what we set out to look for.

The chapel, unfortunately, cannot be anywhere near as old as this, and on previous visits we had decided, from its dimensions, overall proportions, and the character of some exposed walling, that it was of the 12th or 13th century (partial exposure, this summer, of the external east wall confirms this; there are substantial foundations in a neat trench, a plinth course, and attempts to maintain regular horizontal coursing). Largely destroyed or obscured by recent graves, the chapel is internally about 26 ft. 6 in. in E-W, and 14 ft. N-S (east end), 12 ft. at the west end. The doorway appears to have been more or less in the centre of the south wall.

It is always conceivable that this chapel represents, as at Ardwall Isle, Kirkcudbright, the latest of a series of buildings of increasing size and scope on a site first used in post-Roman times. The absence of early graves below the east wall, or hard by it, weighs against this possibility, as does the placing—the chapel sits right up in the north corner of the cemetery.

The distribution of graves, some 30 of which were exposed in this year's small-scale digging, suggests that, prior to the medieval period, there was *another* focus within the cemetery, and that this was much nearer the centre; indeed, slightly south of the centre. In order to understand this, it should be stressed that over a very wide area of north and west Britain in the post-Roman era the enclosed cemetery was itself the primary field-monument of Christian activity, oratories or chapels (initially often of timber, later in stone) being added, notably in the 7th and 8th centuries A.D. Focal points, around which (because of their especial sanctity) graves would tend to cluster, could be and were, not chapels, but 'special graves' of prominent Christians or martyrs, marked out by a variety of features which elaborated the usual grave-form.

The position of Lundy, which is accessible and visible from north-east Cornwall, north Devon, and parts of south Wales, and which is also athwart the sea-lanes from the Mediterranean to south Wales, and from southern Ireland to north-east Cornwall (an early Irish settlement-area), implies that any type of early focal structure found in 6th- or 7th-century cemeteries in the Irish Sea province could also be expected to occur on Lundy. Now these structures are not common, and most are known because, in a ruinous state, they have been exposed for centuries; it was with the hope of finding, and excavating, one such on Lundy that the work was undertaken.

The Lundy 'focus', part of which was noticeable on an earlier visit is of great interest. The graves in the Beacon Hill cemetery are *cist-graves*—shallow, body-length hollows lined with walls of little vertical granite slabs and end-pieces—and, like the Manx *lintel-graves*, are covered with carefully-chosen granite slabs placed horizontally. Definite attempts were made to produce a formal shape, with rounded slabs at the head (west) ends, and a slight tapering in width to the east. Graves lie in approximate rows, north-south and there are some small (4 ft., 4 ft. 6 in.) graves which indicate children; unfortunately the very acid soil has long ago dissolved all skeletal traces, even the teeth.

In the central excavated area, (see plan), the western row, graves 18-19-21-22-24, and the eastern row, 7-8-14-13, may antedate the focal structure—the western row almost certainly, the eastern row possibly. The focus, the north-west corner of which had cut into the ground by the feet of graves 19-21-22, consists of a small rectangular enclosure, about 7 ft. 6 in. east-west and about 17 ft. north-south, formed of upright granite slabs and boulders, those forming the west side being noticeably larger and indeed visible through the turf. Within this enclosure, the three graves 23-11-9 are contained, and one would hazard the opinion that it was constructed to contain or enshrine them.

The northern and southern ends of the enclosure were partly ruined by the insertion of graves 20 and 10 respectively. The attraction of the focal sanctity of the enclosure, with its three graves, presumably resulted in the placing of

graves 1 to 4 on the west face (graves 3 and 2, the latter, like grave 1, having a little plain head slab, being for children); and graves, 5, 6 and 12 on the west side. Grave 10 was 'doubled-up' with grave 17 on its east, sharing a foot/head slab between them and graves 15 and 16 are of the same pattern, in tandem.

There was some evidence that the enclosure was filled with small to medium-sized granite stones, piled up to form a cairn over the three internal graves, and that with the partial destruction of the east side this cairn spilled out over and between the adjacent graves, notably 5 and 6. Other facets of interest are the presence of a ruined clay hearth by grave 3, and at the head of grave 8, an upper rotary quern of 'hand-mill' type (it has a polished cup socket, and was driven with an eccentric staff) lying on a thin lens of (probably) buried turf, above the cover slab of a shallow gully. Hearth and gully, like the occupation layer below, and disturbed by, the graves, relate to the previous secular use of the site.

The enclosure is of a type sparsely represented in the British Isles—there are some in county Kerry, for example—and in my view is a derivative, perhaps not before the late 6th century, from the *cella memoriae*, the little open yard surrounding martyrial tombs in early Mediterranean and north African Christianity. There seems no reason why some, at least, of the Beacon Hill graves should not be contemporary with the OPTIMI and RESTEUTA stones and go back to the late 5th century; the *cella* is of course more of the period of the later stones, those with TIGERNI and POTIT (I). If, as seems likely, the cemetery was in more or less continuous use from sub-Roman times until after the Middle Ages, and indeed later, one might expect by the 8th or 9th century a small stone chapel, not necessarily below the medieval chapel. The uncertainty of the precise dedication of the latter (St. Helen or Elen—perhaps originally, the mysterious *Elidius* or 'Ilid' of St. Helen's, Scilly, and St. Helen's, Cape Cornwall), the apparent presence of cist-graves in a second cemetery on Lundy down by the farm-yard (the so-called 'Giants's Graves'), and the possibility that the cemetery



Beacon Hill Cemetery: the Potiti stone.

Photo: Marius Cooke

was used by mainlanders ferried across for burial (in view of the apparent grave-density), are all aspects of Lundy's Christian story that invite further attention.

A few other cuttings deserve brief mention. The ground around the latest recorded position of the OPTIMI stone was explored, revealing traces of two seemingly early graves, one of them entirely ruined by a late 17th- or 18th-century coffin-burial, but with a curious arrangement of head-stones. On the south side, a small cutting inside the present bank suggested that the original cemetery enceinte was a simple bank, perhaps with a single line of boulder revetment, and a small outer ditch. An original oval, or curvilinear, cemetery outline is, from all analogies, the most likely form, and this should be checked with further cuttings.

Field System

Immediately south of the cemetery, Peter Fowler cut a section through a lynchet in the field system related to the Beacon Hill hut circles (CA 8, 197). The natural slope, dropping from the cemetery, is 5 deg., and the lynchet is 2½ ft. high and some 16 ft. broad. The excavation showed a well-stratified profile, with two accumulations of plough soil above the boulder-strewn buried ground surface. The uppermost is relatively recent and probably explains the existing smooth, bracken-free surface of the surrounding area; the lower, 9 in. thick layer, however, though it produced no artefacts, is clearly ancient and is the cultivated soil belonging to the visible field remains. Associated with it was the original field boundary: a low, dry-stone wall of granite lumps which, when built, was about 2 ft. broad and high and presumably only a marking-out structure. Its existence nevertheless is the reason for the lynchet having accumulated there and for the 2 ft. depth of stratified layers from which samples hold, as they are examined this winter, provide new information about the early environment on the island.

Further Work

Keith Gardner and his team continued their systematic exploration of the island by means of selective trenching, uncovering its history layer by layer like peeling an onion. One small rectangular feature, for instance, situated within an area of Celtic fields, turned out to be of nineteenth century date, and may possibly be the stonemasons lodge associated with the building of the coastguard lookout on Tibbets Hill, some 10 metres to the north.

Further work was carried out on the area around the medieval long-house known as the Widows Tenement, where the medieval enclosures overlie earlier Celtic fields. 20 metres north-east of the northern entrance to the medieval enclosure a 10 ft. diameter circular structure was noted, with at least two others between it and the coast to the north-east. The first one was sectioned, but was devoid of dating evidence, although soil samples were taken for pollen analysis from beneath the low granite foundation wall. Previous soil samples recently reported on by Professor Dimbleby show that pollen is well preserved in Lundy soil, and indicated an agricultural flora including cereals sealed under 4 in. of heathland soil.

1969 survey work now confirms that the area between Gannets Combe and the Three Quarter Wall was farmed and occupied in the Iron Age period, and it now seems possible as the gaps between the once apparently separate and nucleated settlements are seen to close, that the whole island has been under prehistoric cultivation.

Acknowledgments

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