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TRIAL EXCAVATIONS
AT GOVAN OLD PARISH CHURCH 1994

Introduction

It has long been thought that Govan Old began as a religious community during the early middle ages because of the remarkable collection of sculpture it houses (Allen and Anderson 1903, Radford 1967, Ritchie 1994), the form of its churchyard and its dedication. In August 1994 a programme of excavation was undertaken to investigate the archaeological potential of Govan Old parish church. The excavations sought to establish whether medieval archaeological deposits had survived later burial activity and building works.

The most compelling reasons for believing that Govan was a church of some importance in the early medieval period is the large and unusual collection of stone sculpture housed within the church. Although the significance of the stones has been recognised since the mid-19th century, they have recently been the subject of detailed analysis (see Ritchie 1994). With respect to dating the most recent view is that the earliest stones are likely to date to the end of the 9th century, while the bulk of them dates to the 10th and 11th centuries.

The meagre historical background to the site has been recently examined by Alan Macquarrie (1990). Prior to the well-known first mention of it in the early twelfth century there are no historical notices of Govan, but the dedication to St Constantine has frequently been taken as evidence for a religious establishment in the 6th century. Unfortunately critical review of the traditions regarding the dedication to St Constantine shows that they are too confused to provide a secure historical date. Nevertheless, throughout the later middle ages Govan was one of the principal parishes of the Glasgow diocese and the earliest surviving map (Bleau’s Atlas published in 1654) shows it to be a substantial ecclesiastical establishment. Although stylised, the church represented in Bleau is surrounded by an oval enclosing wall.

The curvilinear form of the churchyard has been regarded as evidence for the antiquity of the site, despite its irregular and elongated shape. The present (Rowand Anderson designed) church was built in 1884-8 to replace a mid-19th century church (built 1826), which itself replaced a Medieval, perhaps Romanesque, church demolished in 1762 (McKinstry 1992). Fortunately the orientation of the 1826 church and the concentration of burial lairs forced Rowand Anderson to orient his church north-south and project it beyond the churchyard to the north. This means that the present large church does not entirely overlay the site of the earliest known church, which is presumed to be medieval.
Aims

One of the clearest points to emerge from the recent flurry of scholarly activity was that substantial further progress would require archaeological investigations. The trial excavations reported on here were intended to provide the basis for future investigations. The specific archaeological aims of the 1994 season were to establish:

1. *Do the boundaries of the present churchyard represent the original foundation?*
2. *Have later medieval archaeological structures and deposits survived the numerous burials evident from the 17th to 20th centuries?*
3. *Whether the remains of an earlier church survived in the churchyard?*

In addition we arrived at Govan with a second, non-academic, set of aims, which were more concerned with promoting recognition of the fact that the Govan stones provided the earliest physical evidence for Christianity in Glasgow. To achieve the second set of aims we sought to involve members of the community in the project and to make the site open and accessible to the public during the course of the excavations. Public interest exceeded all expectations when between 2,000-3,000 people visited end of dig ‘Open Day’.

Trench Locations and Methodology

Seven trenches (labelled A - G) were opened during the course of the excavation (see plate 1).

Trenches A and B were intended to investigate whether the curving line of the modern churchyard wall follows the original boundary, which was expected to be defined by an earthen bank and ditch. It was thought that the ditch, if present, would represent one of the best locations for the survival of early medieval deposits and artefacts.

Trench A was located outside the existing churchyard wall close to the present entrance where the wall is low and carries a fence. Trench B was located over the wall inside the churchyard and offset to Trench A to avoid undermining the wall, while allowing a continuous profile of the internal and external deposits to be made.

Trench C located adjacent to the south-east corner of the church and was intended to locate traces of the earlier churches and evaluate their condition of preservation. This narrow trench was located under a path leading eastwards towards the former site of the manse. The path appears on Kyle’s churchyard plan of 1809 (Willsher 1992), which suggested that no burials would have taken place here in recent times.

Trench D was located against the northern churchyard wall east of the church.
As with trenches A and B it was hoped to establish if the wall marked the original boundary of the churchyard and whether a boundary ditch survived.

Trenches E and F were located outside of the northern stretch of the wall facing the river. In addition to searching for the boundary ditch, it was hoped to locate the original riverbank and gain some insight into the pre-modern topography.

Trench G was located in the south-east corner of the churchyard where the wall comes to a slight point. The trench was intended to test whether this was the original entrance to the churchyard prior to the laying out of the approach from Govan Road.

Prior to the excavation a geophysical survey (measuring soil electrical resistivity) was undertaken in an attempt to locate buried features such as wall foundations. The intention was that this information would be used to locate the trenches. Unfortunately the results of the survey proved inconclusive.

To maximise the amount of time spent excavating archaeologically significant levels a machine was used wherever appropriate. All archaeological features were examined and recorded using a combination of written descriptions, measured drawings and photography. In addition the excavation was documented by a professional photographer (Joehari Lee) and by a professional video team (Life’s Rich Tapestry). Only the summary results of the excavation are presented here. A detailed account of the archaeological deposits has been presented in the interim report (Cullen and Driscoll 1995).

The Excavations

Trench A (plates 2 & 3)

Upon removal of modern deposits, it was observed that the natural clay subsoil was abruptly cut by a large ditch, which lay about 1.4m south of the churchyard wall and apparently runs parallel to it. The ditch was re-dug on at least two occasions, which has slightly altered its shape. In its original form it seems to have been wide (probably about 3m) and relatively shallow (about 1m deep). The exact form of the original ditch has been obliterated by later recuts, which produced a narrower and more steep sided profile. It is presumed that the upcast of the ditch created an earthen bank which was an integral part of the churchyard boundary. Unfortunately repeated rebuilding of the churchyard wall over the centuries has disturbed much of the evidence for the bank.

Apart from the modern objects in the rubbish pits, very few finds were
recovered from the trench. The most significant finds from the ditch were some fragments of worked shale from the eroded fill of the first ditch, which are similar to shale fragments recovered from Trench B that are thought to be of an early medieval date. The upper fill of the final ditch contained two sherds of medieval pottery (14th-15th century).

The significance of the ditch cannot be underestimated. The position of the boundary at this point seems to have changed little throughout time and clearly was the precursor to the existing boundary of the churchyard, which may be reasonably thought to occupy the site of the bank for much of its circumference. The presence of the worked shale strongly suggests that it represents the boundary of the original Christian settlement and we are probably entitled to use the Latin term for a monastic wall, *tallum*, to describe it.

**Trench B (plates 2 & 3)**

Trench B was located offset to Trench A, inside the churchyard in an area that appeared clear of recent grave disturbance. In recent centuries the ground backing onto the churchyard wall had only been disturbed by repair work, which did not penetrate to a sequence of stratified, charcoal-rich layers. The
Plate 3. Trenches A and B Composite North-South Section.
succession of layers of soot, burnt clay and charcoal produced fragments of coal, shale, burnt bone, cinder and a small amount of slag. Only a single hearth was identified in these layers. These levels were disturbed by two poorly preserved adult burials, which on the basis of their decayed condition are thought to be medieval in date.

Collectively these featureless deposits and the rude hearth may be seen as representing an industrial area or workshop at the back of the mill. Worked shale was also recovered, including a rough-out for a shale ring. Although no definite structural evidence was forthcoming in the small area excavated it seems likely that some sort of workshop existed in the general area.

**Trench C (plate 4)**

Trench C was intended to establish the presence, or otherwise of any earlier churches than those historically recorded. It was located underneath the pathway running from the south-east corner of the present church on a line with the south wall. Below a sequence of paths, were traces of three demolished structures. In addition two poorly-preserved adult burials, probably medieval and one modern (?18th century) infant burial were excavated.

Trench C was located in an area known to have seen a succession of churches and it appears that two or three of them are recorded in the trench. The last demolition evidence, a massive foundation trench, probably relates to the last building to have an orthodox east-west orientation, which was built in 1762 and demolished in 1826. The earlier building debris may well represent the medieval church reported to have been demolished in 1762 (Davidson Kelly 1994, 12). The deepest foundations are the best preserved although they contain no mortar. This suggests that they were to support a timber building. It would seem reasonable to suggest that if these are the foundations of a timber church they predate the widespread adoption of mortared masonry for church architecture in Scotland which took place in the 12th century. In such a small trench it is impossible to give a clear indication of the nature and extent of the buildings represented by these remains, but for the moment it does seem reasonable to think that they represent churches.

**Trench D (plates 5 and 6)**

Trench D was intended to investigate the interior of the northern boundary of the original churchyard. This stretch of the churchyard wall was selected because it seemed one of the least disturbed by the neighbouring shipyards, but digging here required the excavation of the burial lair of the Monteiths of Westbank. The headstone is carved in granite and remains perfectly legible:
Plate 4. Trench C, tightly packed surface of the dry-stone foundations approximately 1.3m below the present ground surface.
IN MEMORY OF
JANE CASSELS
WIFE OF JOHN MONTEITH WRITER GLASGOW
WHO DIED 23 FEBRUARY 1839 AGED 36
JOHN MONTEITH OF WESTBANK
DIED 19 OCTOBER 1842 AGED 64
WILLIAM MONTEITH BARRISTER LONDON
DIED 11 JULY 1846 AGED 34
JOHN MONTEITH WRITER
DIED 20 NOVEMBER 1852 AGED 48
HUGH MONTEITH MERCHANT
DIED 5 JUNE 1854 AGED 47
HELEN THOMSON
WIFE OF JOHN MONTEITH OF WESTBANK
DIED 17 OCTOBER 1855 AGED 76

Plate 5. Trench D, with interested visitors to the dig.
The lair was not completely excavated and only four burials were discovered. These were all male and based upon their stratigraphic relationships have been identified (see S. E. King’s report in Cullen and Driscoll 1995) as Hugh, John, William and John (the elder). The broad age categories predicted by techniques of skeletal analysis compare favourably to the ages stated on the tomb stone. Based on the chronology of births and deaths, John the elder seems to have been the father of John, William and Hugh.

The preservation of the coffins was very good and provides a wealth of detail about the construction and decoration of these ornate 19th century objects. Not only did the metal fittings such as handles, lead linings and decorative trim survive, but in places the wood and velvet covering were present and in one case even the shroud was present. Once the coffins and the grave fills had been removed, and the areas disturbed by the construction of the present churchyard wall and the brick wall of the lair were taken into account, it became clear that only a very small area (1.3m x 0.6m) of undisturbed ground remained within the lair. This patch may represent an old ground surface of indeterminate date, however all traces of earlier activity within the churchyard had been removed and no evidence bearing on the antiquity of the churchyard wall was recovered.

Trenches E (plate 6) and F

Trenches E and F were located immediately over the northern wall in waste ground which was formerly occupied by the Harland and Wolff shipyard. Both trenches E and F were mechanically excavated through the rubble of the former yard. The most interesting discovery was that the shipyard structures had been built upon a deep deposit of soil which had evidently been dumped on the site prior to construction. Although little of archaeological interest was seen here, the dumping raises the possibility that elsewhere on the Harland and Wolff site pre-construction structures may have been preserved.

Trench G

This trench was located to investigate the possibility that the original entry to the churchyard was located in the south-east of the churchyard. Kyle’s 1809 churchyard survey shows a small gate at this point which opens onto a lane leading to Water Row. This lane is preserved in an arched passageway through the Pearce Institute. Unfortunately, because of the great depth of 19th and 20th century rubbish pits discovered here, this trench was not completed, so no light was shed on the possible entrance.
boundary of the churchyard and that its alignment corresponds closely with that of the present churchyard, at least on the southern side. There is every reason to expect that this represents the original boundary of the Christian establishment documented by the carved stones.

We cannot be quite so confident that the foundations seen in Trench C, next to the church, represent those of an early timber church, but such an interpretation would be reasonable. Only further excavation could resolve the issue with certainty. The third aim, to discover whether archaeological deposits and structures have survived the burials of the 18th and 19th century, was also achieved. We now have a reasonable appreciation of where early deposits are likely to survive (and where they have been disturbed). Apart from the site of the family lairs east of the church (Trench D), it would appear that the perimeter of the churchyard has remained free from burials during the last few centuries. Therefore any structures set against the boundary are likely to have survived. As we have seen this was where some of the workshops were located. With respect to the interior, deeply stratified remains may be expected to survive in some places depending on the intensity of later burial.

"See also Macquarrie, A.D. "Lectures for St Constantine’s Day (11 March) in the Aberdeen Breviary", pages 25-32. Editor.

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References


