

## ATALE OF TWO CHAPELS

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**with**

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Christianity crept into the Northern Isles by the 8th century on two fronts, partly through monastic activity emanating from the Columban establishment at Iona, and partly through the influence of the more territorially based Roman Church moving northwards from Northumbria. An account of the overall evidence — historical, archaeological and linguistic — is well summarised by Foster (1996: 79-95) and points, *inter alia*, to the role of secular authority in the advancement of Christian activity. It emphasises too the difficulties of interpreting the documentary record within a period which is essentially proto-historical rather than one of history proper, and also indirectly highlights the relatively poor archaeological record of ecclesiastical archaeology in the north.

Monasticism based on the Celtic model has traditionally been assumed to have provided the vehicle for the transmission of Christianity to Orkney and Shetland in the later Iron Age. A number of likely monastic sites have been postulated throughout Shetland (Lamb 1973), although none of these have been excavated or securely dated. Indications of early Christianity in both Orkney and Shetland tend to rest with carved stones (for example the Papil stone), and with artefacts of purported Christian significance such as hand bells. Few of these have secure contextual dating and the excavation of potential Christian sites has been extremely limited, mostly because so few can be identified with any degree of conviction. More recently, investigation at St Boniface Church on Papa Westray, Orkney has utilised updated methodologies and techniques of data analysis; this has enabled a more considered view of the evidence to be presented and demonstrates the value of targeted archaeological excavation (Lowe 1998: 6-9) within the wider framework of evidence types.

This paper provides an opportunity to discuss the preliminary findings of two further recent excavations, at Papa Stronsay, Orkney, and at the Landberg promontory on Fair Isle, Shetland where respective sets of structural remains, both ostensibly chapel sites, are considered to have significant contributions to make to the understanding of the development of early Christianity in the Northern Isles. Both sites were necessarily excavated on the basis of the immediate threat posed by coastal erosion: in the case of the Papa Stronsay site the sea had virtually reached one corner of the building and had already decimated a boundary wall and associated linear features; and on the Landberg site

the persistent threat of coastal erosion was being exacerbated by rabbit and puffin activity. On both sites the work was carried out on behalf of Historic Scotland by the Department of Ancient History and Archaeology, University of Birmingham in partnership with Headland Archaeology Ltd (Papa Stronsay site), and The National Trust for Scotland (Landberg site).

### **St Nicholas' Chapel, Papa Stronsay**

The construction of the chapel of St Nicholas on the island of Papa Stronsay, Orkney probably belongs to the 12<sup>th</sup> century on architectural grounds. It was built as a bicameral structure of nave and chancel type (although the chancel seems to have been a slightly later addition) but was partially demolished in 1790 when the stones were used for the building of a new barn (OSA: 326). However, the site may belong to a period of earlier Christianity of which little is known in the Northern Isles. A cross-slab, inscribed D(OMI)NE D(EI) (RCAHMS 1946, ii: 337), is reported to have been dug up nearby (Rhys 1892: 1898) but became lost sometime in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. The slab has been dated to the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century on the basis of its inscription (Radford 1962: 174), and 8<sup>th</sup> century Northumbrian influence could also be proposed on the basis of the form of the accompanying incised cross. The recorded presence of a second chapel, St Bride's, also on Papa Stronsay, and probably contemporary, suggests an unusual degree of status, possibly monastic, attached to such a small island.

Early Christian activity is normally accepted as underlying 'papar' place-names. Some 27 examples are known, mostly in the Northern and Western Isles (MacDonald 1977), and have been shown to correlate with high quality farming land (e.g. Lamb 1995; Lowe 1987) rather than with the isolated, barren areas traditionally associated with eremitic activity. The locations, therefore, have some claim to representing a particular brand of ecclesiastical community. Moreover, an incident in *Orkneyinga Saga* in which Rognvald visited Papa Stronsay to secure a supply of malt for his Yuletide ale, and where he was later to be murdered in 1046 (Pálsson and Edwards 1978: cap. 29), can be interpreted as suggesting that Papa Stronsay grew the best barley in Orkney. Lamb also points out that the establishment of ecclesiastical groups on high quality farming land must have been endowed and supported by the secular power in pre-Viking times (1993: 226).

The Papa Stronsay site, as well as providing an opportunity to make an important contribution to research on the development, character and continuity of the pre-Norse church on Orkney (e.g. Lamb 1993 and 1995), is also under threat of severe coastal erosion. Topographical and geophysical surveys (e.g. Wilson and Moore 1996) have both indicated the proximity of masonry and probable boundary features adjacent to the exposed cliff section. As a result of the potential destruction of the site, systematic excavation has subsequently



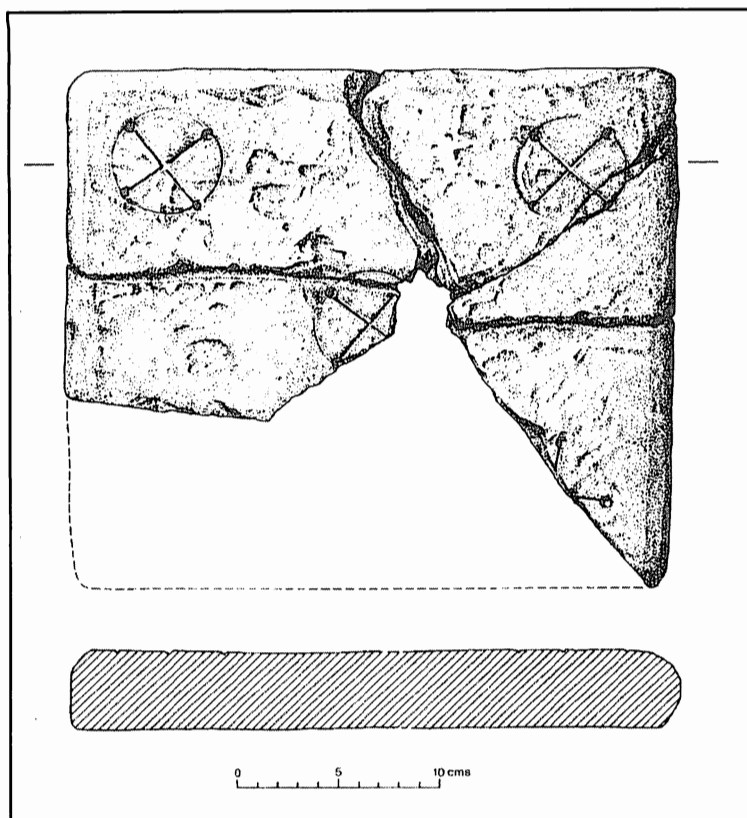
**Fig. 1.** St Nicholas' chapel, Papa Stronsay during excavation, from the west. The two side altars stand at opposite sides of the east end of the nave. The curvilinear building and flagging can be seen protruding to the left of the chapel.

been undertaken seasonally since 1998 in an attempt to shed further light on the development of early Christianity in the Northern Isles.

To date, the relevant findings of the investigations fall into two main phases: the nature of the chapel itself and its eventual demise; and structures and features which pre-date the chapel. An excavation strategy was devised to expose the full extent of the medieval building, to undertake a process of structural analysis, and to relate the standing remains to an earlier history of settlement on the site. Of key importance was the need to identify the nature of earlier activity on the site, and to assess the extent to which Christian worship might be traced from late Iron Age (Pictish) times through the Norse period into the early Middle Ages.

### **The chapel (Fig. 1)**

Excavations revealed that the chapel consisted of a nave (5.32m x 3.93m internally) and a chancel (2 m x 2.5 m internally) which had been added later. Excavation within the nave interior revealed two graves immediately to the west of the chancel threshold. The earlier contained the well-preserved skeleton of a child but with a disturbed fill containing other disarticulated remains, and the later contained fragments of at least two individuals. Overlying these graves was a possible floor bedding layer covered by the highly disturbed remnants of a stone and mortar floor which contained three conjoining fragments



**Fig. 2. Drawing of the incised altar slab from Papa Stronsay (Sylvia Stevenson).**

of a cross-incised stone identified as an altar slab (Fig. 2). A complete stone of this type can be interpreted as a consecrated super-altar or *sigillum*. This is clearly indicated by the form and decoration of the stone, the five crosses representing the wounds that Christ suffered on the cross. This was probably not a portable altar, but would have covered a recess containing relics set within the surface of a permanent altar base.

This floor layer also overlay the kneeling stones of two side altars located at the north-east and south-east sides of the nave respectively. The fronting stones of these side altars had been cut to fit around the foundation plinth of the nave, suggesting that the side altars may have been a later addition, possibly contemporary with the construction of the chancel. Side altars are an unusual feature and, in the form seen here, are unique to Orkney. The presence of multiple altars in such a small building would seem to indicate a complex liturgy, possibly one with monastic associations.

The floor identified in the nave of the chapel was overlain by thick rubble deposits containing high concentrations of animal bone and shell, presumably providing make-up material for the construction of a coarse flagged floor which had survived through until the time of excavation. The earliest of these make-up layers contained a hollowed sandstone basin, possibly a water stoup or *piscina*. This latest floor showed evidence of burning in the south-west corner of the nave, probably from a temporary hearth, and a post setting had been cut into the collapsed material overlying the chancel floor. The setting contained a glass/crystal button with copper alloy mountings, probably dating to the early post-medieval period

Investigation of the masonry joints between the nave and the chancel showed that the chancel had been appended to the east walls of the nave; this view was supported by the presence of the fill of at least one grave underlying the walling together with a series of intercutting deposits underlying the chancel floor. The construction of a foundation plinth for the chancel walling had also disturbed a long cist burial lying immediately adjacent to the south-east exterior of the building. The cist contained the complete skeleton of an adult, although fragments of a child's skull were also contained in the fill and suggested a longer history of burial activity in the immediate area. The interior of the chancel contained evidence for a series of floor surfaces, the latest consisting of a thin spread of mortar on either side of the altar. There were also traces of localised burning within these floors indicating both extensive reuse and a variable history. The nature of the final collapse supported an earlier antiquarian view that the chancel roof had been barrel-vaulted (RCAHMS 1946, ii: 344).

The changing history of the site was also evident from the alignment of an outer enclosure wall which was traced at three specific points. It was initially identified to the west of the chapel lying roughly parallel to the chapel's west wall, although its southern return had been lost to the sea. However, this west wall appeared to run northwards well beyond the chapel itself. A return eastwards was unevicenced, although a northern enclosure wall was identified running roughly parallel to the north wall of the chancel. Not only was the alignment of the enclosure different to that of the chapel, but it also overlay earlier boundary walls laid out with a slightly different configuration.

### **Features pre-dating the chapel (Fig. 1)**

To date, the excavations have revealed a series of stone features around the exterior of the chapel foundations, comprising a cellular structure under and to the north of the chapel foundations, and flagged surfaces to the west. The curvilinear wall of the cellular structure lay underneath the north wall of the 12<sup>th</sup>-century nave, and further excavation will be required to establish whether or not this wall continued under the floor of the nave itself. Structures with curved walls of this type find close parallels with late Iron-Age or Pictish

structures such as those excavated at Buckquoy (Ritchie 1977), Howe (Smith 1994) and Kebister in Shetland (Owen and Lowe 1999). Unusually, however, the structure here was almost entirely devoid of the artefactual or midden material normally recovered from settlement sites; this suggested that the function of the structure was unlikely to have been domestic. Significantly, a fragment of green porphyry was recovered from a rubble deposit filling the cellular structure, directly below the north wall of the nave. Porphyry (*porfido verde antico*) was widely used as a decorative material in Roman times and can be provenanced to quarries in Greece. It tends to occur from the 7<sup>th</sup> century as a reused material in the embellishment of churches, particularly around shrines and altars; its presence here can be used to imply a Christian presence predating the medieval chapel itself.

Immediately to the east of the curvilinear wall lay a partially collapsed line of drystone facing which may possibly represent the outer element of the same wall. A flagged surface lay to the west of this and continued under the north wall of the nave. To the north-east of the chancel, drystone walls and a flagged surface were exposed, the latter incorporating a stone-lined storage tank. These features, clearly part of a large drystone-walled building, were covered by a midden deposit containing concentrations of shell and animal bone, several sherds of Iron Age pottery, and two probable line-sinkers. The nature of these deposits was in sharp contrast to the almost sterile deposits associated with the curvilinear structure to the west.

An east-west aligned wall running roughly parallel to the enclosure wall of the later chapel was exposed to the north of the cellular structure. This wall was wider than the chapel enclosure wall, and of looser construction, containing rounded beach cobbles as well as flat slabs. A wall of similar construction and alignment was exposed further to the west and also at the cliff edge to the south west of the chapel. The configuration of this earlier enclosure differed slightly in alignment and area to that identified as being associated with the chapel itself.

## **Interpretation**

Two seasons of excavation have more than confirmed the value of the initial research strategy, and have additionally highlighted the severity of the threat to the site posed by coastal erosion. In summary, the results of survey and excavation suggested that the chapel was preceded by an extensive structural complex which included a cellular structure partially underlying the nave, possibly ecclesiastical in its own right. The absence of artefacts and midden deposits associated with these structures also suggested a non-domestic, and therefore possibly ecclesiastical, function. Excavation of the chapel itself indicated that the chancel was a secondary addition to a primary uni-cameral building, potentially one even of 11<sup>th</sup>-century date. The two side altars in the nave, might

be interpreted as relic altars and reflect an elaborate liturgy more commensurate with monastic activity. Further points of interest emerged with the fact that the two phases of enclosure wall surrounding the chapel were not in full alignment with the chapel itself.

Together with historical inference, these findings considerably strengthened the view that St. Nicholas' was a monastic site of Pictish origin with continuity into the Norse period and hence a site of considerable research importance. It could thus shed light not only on the development of the early Church in Orkney but also on wider issues concerning the organisation of Pictish society and the transition to Norse rule.

### **The Landberg promontory**

The Landberg promontory lies on Fair Isle, an island located approximately equidistantly between the Orkney and Shetland groups of islands and some 24 km south of mainland Shetland. Traditionally described as a 'fort' in archaeological literature the promontory lies on the east side of the island and survives as a flat grass-covered tongue of land some 42 m long but no more than 12 m across at its widest point. The cliff faces are almost sheer for 25 m down to the sea and the scale of erosion is severe. The position is fortuitously strategic in that it commands views over approaches to the north-east and the south-east, is easily accessible, but is also easily defensible once access has been achieved.

The site, which is of scheduled monument status, receives cursory mention in the Royal Commission *Inventory* of 1946 (no 1194) based on fieldwork carried out in 1930, and has since been the subject of more detailed investigation by Lamb within the wider context of Iron Age promontory forts in the Northern Isles (1980: 43-49) and as part of an enhanced local survey (Hunter 1996: no 740). Lamb's survey plan drawn during a site visit in 1970 additionally provides a useful control against which to measure the rate of subsequent erosion (1970: fig 14).

The promontory plateau itself is more elevated than the landward approach which slopes gently up from sea level, the distinction being exaggerated by a revetted bank on the landward edge of the promontory and by an apparent deliberate deepening of the natural rift between the two. Outer protection is afforded by three ramparts each now barely more than 1 m high created from turf and bedrock upcast which has presumably been scooped from between the rampart bases to form shallow intermediate ditches. Access through the ramparts appears to have been specifically designed to facilitate a straight line of visibility from the brow of the promontory itself. This line follows a raised track across the rift before leading directly through a passage in the main rampart on the promontory proper.

On the promontory itself a combination of natural erosion, rabbits and the local puffin population have played havoc with the surviving archaeological remains. On the southern part of the tongue the 'string of shallow depressions'



observed by Lamb during fieldwork in 1970 and interpreted as possible hut sites (1980: 80) are now barely evident; even the main rampart facing the landward side is difficult to distinguish from the turf and tussock-covered erosion. Directly behind it, however, the remains of a rectangular structure measuring approximately 9 x 5 m externally lying across the promontory is still visible. The collapsed walling is approximately 1 m wide and stood to a height of some 0.6 m, although the large facing blocks and core of loose stones recorded during Lamb's fieldwork are no longer evident. The structure does not appear to be of characteristic blockhouse type and has a secondary appearance. Coarse pottery and some later medieval material has been recovered from the vicinity by visitors to the site, particularly from the north east corner of the promontory where rabbit activity has continued to generate amounts of midden. Probing in that quarter suggested that these archaeological deposits were up to 1 m in depth.

The original prehistoric adaptation and use of the promontory lie outwith the scope of this paper: it suffices to record here that the early topography of the monument is represented by the approach system of trivalliate ramparts, a steepening of the access isthmus, and by stone revetments set against the only accessible side of the stack. These appear to be reflections of power and status as much as the more traditional view of defence and might be seen as a mirror to the dominance of an Iron-Age worthy with a commitment to ostentation and display. On the promontory itself evidence of the nature and function



**Fig. 3.** The likely medieval chapel on the Landberg, Fair Isle from the south. The stepping arrangement can be seen in the interior of the building to the right of the photograph.



of the site were few. Apart from earth cut features and the remains of a wall base (possibly intended for a blockhouse or similar structure), the main feature was a sunken gallery which took the form of an earthen sunken cell or chamber which had been hacked out from solid bedrock against the western edge of the promontory.

### **The medieval chapel? (Fig. 3)**

The topographical survey had pointed to the presence of a rectangular turf-covered structure lying on the north part of the promontory, the general appearance suggesting a single structure superimposed on earlier Iron Age remains. However, during excavation the character and physical relationship of the exposed wall lengths indicated a more complex picture of building activity and alteration. At least two main phases of activity could be identified: the construction of an approximately square building set on a foundation of crude boulders, followed by a second phase consisting of an extension of this building to the west to produce the final rectangular shape.

In the primary phase of building, levelling of the Iron-Age remains had been necessary to provide a flat foundation against the sloping ground surface, particularly towards the east of the promontory where the ground fell away more steeply. The exercise had caused considerable stratigraphic disturbance and had created much rubble which had been infiltrated by both rabbits and puffs. The foundation build was distinctive and contained numerous large rounded boulders which provided a crude but effective walling platform slightly wider than the building it supported.

The building itself was coursed and of different character to the foundations, measuring externally approximately 5.6 m (N/S) x 6.0 m (E/W) in a roughly square design. The north wall was well preserved, surviving to a height of at least 0.5 m with a well-built facing of large angular sandstone blocks and with a width of c. 1.2 m. The inner face was constructed of smaller, angular stones, the space between the inner and outer builds being filled with a stoney-silt. The construction of the return to the south was similar, and a partially-robbled feature resembling a flight of three clay-bonded stone steps had been built against its inner face across the full width of the building. These appear to represent some form of dais or platform, although why this should be necessary in such a small building is unclear. The steps give emphasis to the eastern part of the interior, possibly in an altar capacity although there are no parallels. A single entrance was located in an approximately central position within the south wall, and its east door jamb was in direct alignment between the beginning of the steps at the east end of the building. The west wall had been robbed but the original position could be evidenced from distinction between the occupation deposits.

In its secondary phase the square building was extended to the west to create a rectangular structure measuring approximately 6 (N/S) x 9 (E/W) m.

The north wall was extended, probably using material from the demolished west wall of the primary phase but with a different build of more rubble-like quality. The enlarged structure was provided with a new north-facing entrance approximately 1 m wide located at the north-west corner, possibly because the width of the new building prevented easy access around the sides along the edges of the promontory. No external features were seen to be associated, but internally a shallow pit had been cut into the compacted clay floor on the western side. The west wall of the structure was itself replaced, possibly through result of collapse.

There was also some evidence of subsequent activity, notably a blocking of the north-west entrance which may imply a different internal configuration to the structure as a whole, together with an associated patchy stone floor. Widespread disturbance caused by animal burrowing made it difficult to date with any accuracy these later deposits from the various artefacts recovered. A total of 38 sherds of medieval pottery and 13 sherds of post-medieval pottery, some animal bone, 19 iron objects and a musket ball were recovered from layers sealing this stoney floor. This assemblage represents the majority of the medieval and post-medieval artefacts recovered during the excavations as a whole, and can be seen as providing a broad date range for the life of the building.

#### **The earlier roundhouse (Fig. 4)**

Subsequent to the disuse of the promontory as a 'fort' the site had become used for the construction of at least one roundhouse. A partially surviving



**Fig. 4. The remains of the primary roundhouse from the west showing partially surviving walling and inner zone containing hearth.**

curved, drystone wall built in a combination of orthostatic and coursed stones, had surviving to a maximum height of 0.8 m, and formed a roundhouse with an internal diameter of approximately 4.5 m. Inside the roundhouse was a line of orthostats, roughly concentric to the walling, set on edge, and demarcating an inner zone. Lying centrally within the compartment was a decorative stone hearth; this consisted of angular slabs and elongated beach cobbles set on edge, a rounded boulder at the north-east end, and a fill made up of thin layers of burnt clay and charcoal. In the south-east corner of the internal compartment was a stone-lined tank, half-filled with a silty material and covered with thin stone slabs. Burnt material had become piled up against the interior of the walls containing quantities of prehistoric pottery and animal bone fragments indicative of active settlement.

In a subsequent phase of activity the north wall of the roundhouse was straightened and extended to the west, and a similar extension was probably carried out to the south wall also, although no evidence of this survived. The alteration gave the structure a funnel-like character, altered the internal configuration of the structure and accentuated the position of the hearth which was moved more directly within the line of the doorway. There was a noteworthy quantity of pottery and bone recorded from the hearth.

### **Copper alloy working**

A layer of silt and rubble debris subsequently sealed the occupation of the roundhouse possibly indicating a period of abandonment. To the north of the roundhouse these deposits were overlain by two hearths, presumably related, one consisting of a deep deposit of successive thin layers of charcoal, ash, burnt clay and burnt peat piled up against the wall of the roundhouse but with no hearth in association. The other consisted of a large, flat, stone slab, with a heat-shattered upper surface adjacent to a flue constructed of two parallel lines of stones set on edge.

The lack of any contemporary deposits within the roundhouse at this stage suggests that although the roundhouse was still standing when the hearths were in use, it was probably not occupied other than for temporary or seasonal activity. Two metal working moulds were recovered from layers immediately above the hearths, which may suggest small-scale copper alloy activity in this area. The features had been substantially destroyed in subsequent medieval building activity.

### **Interpretation**

One of the main questions that these excavations pose relates to the status of a site such as the Landberg, given the relative inaccessibility and the difficulty of transporting building materials. The location bears all the hallmarks of a classic promontory site: difficulty of access; 'defendability'; substantial

ramparts; and visual impact, but it is not the type of location expected for a roundhouse or for a purposefully constructed rectangular building. One solution lies in the possibility that the status of the location had been enhanced by gifting of the land into ecclesiastical use at a time when it was politically convenient for secular power to be supportive of Church expansion. This would explain some of the difficulties of interpretation and would also support the view that the rectangular structure may have been a chapel.

By the time of the later Middle Ages numerous chapels had been constructed throughout Shetland under the control of some 30 head churches, although not all chapel locations are known. Many appear to have had their roots in a resurgence of Christianity in the later Norse period at a time when chapel building and secular organisation appear to be closely linked. On Fetlar, for example, there is an exact correlation between scattalds (taxable land units) and known chapel sites (Crawford 1987: fig 68). It has also been argued that chapel building developed at the behest of local worthies in order to facilitate worship within their own lands (e.g. Cant 1975: 9), and it is at this point that the Landberg site may have been transferred into Christian ownership.

The rectangular structure can be satisfactorily interpreted as a chapel both through orientation and dimensions, and particularly through the unusual stepping arrangement which emphasises the east end. The primary, more square, structure to which the stepping arrangement was integral, is harder to parallel but can be given no alternative function on present evidence. Dating, currently on the basis of pottery, places the structures within the medieval and early post-medieval periods.

This still leaves the problem of the earlier roundhouse phase unresolved. Is it conceivable that the transference to Christian use occurred even earlier, and that the roundhouse phase represents the habitation of a small monastic community or group of eremitics? It might otherwise be hard to believe why a secular settlement should have chosen such an austere and dangerous position, even with the benefit of reusable building materials from a derelict blockhouse. This interpretation might also better explain the post-roundhouse phase of copper alloy working where the mould fragments have parallels on early Christian sites elsewhere, for example on the Brough of Birsay (Curle 1982), as well as on other sites bordering the Atlantic fringe.

## Summary

Both these sites illustrate the complexities of interpreting archaeological evidence, and both demonstrate the importance of considering secular influence in determining the advance and development of Christianity, particularly through Norse times. At Papa Stronsay the location is one of status and of continuing Christian tradition probably from the 8th century. The site may uniquely illustrate the persistence of Christian worship from Pictish times, throughout the

Norse period, into the Middle Ages. In doing so it emphasises the 'Papa' name as one of special significance, and enforces the view that certain ecclesiastical establishments, backed by politically motivated secular leaders, were afforded status and protection in a relationship which was mutually advantageous.

The Landberg site might also be one of Christian tradition. The location represents an obsolete and conveniently well-defined area of ground within the gift or endowment of a local worthy; it reflects a coarse territorial infrastructure in which political power lay in the hands of individuals, and in which the place of the Church may have been granted particular status. Archaeologically this manifests itself only in the later part of the occupation in the form of a stone-built chapel. Earlier features are less enthusiastically Christian and serve to reinforce the difficulties in distinguishing between secular and ecclesiastical remains.

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