

Fig. 10.1 Isle Martin, showing the Pier close to which John Woodhouse established a fishing station in 1775. *Clach Fear Eilean-Mhairtean*, lies at the southern end of the little bay. The cross-slab stands within a small disused burial ground where a ruinous stone building was known as the chapel of St. Martin. O.S. 6 inch Sheet XIII, 1st edition, surveyed 1875.

TWO ECCLESIASTICAL SITES IN THE SUMMER ISLES, WESTER ROSS

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The Summer Isles are a group of about 20 islands and rocky skerries at the mouth of Loch Broom, most lying just off the Coigach peninsula, but with some reaching far out across to Greenstone Point [Fig. 10.4]. Several of the larger islands have been inhabited at one time or another, notably Isle Martin, Tanera More and Isle Ristol, whilst Priest Island also shows signs of some modest one-time habitation.

ISLE MARTIN

Isle Martin is the innermost of the Summer Isles, about 6km north of Ullapool and 1km off the coast of Coigach at Ardmair. It is a rocky island rising to a height of around 120m (393ft), roughly triangular in shape and measuring some 1.8km east-west by 1.4km north-south. There is an area of lower ground at its southern extremity close to the bay, where a fishing station was first established in 1775 and where the present houses on the island are situated [Fig. 10.1].

The burial ground, which lies near the south-east corner of the island, close to the shore and the landing place, is now defined on three sides by a stone wall and contains an upright stone cross slab and a roofless stone structure 4.2m square with an entrance on its west side. The latter is known as the chapel of St Martin; it appears to be of post-Reformation date and a number of roughly worked grave markers are visible around it. What may be the site of an earlier building running east-west lies to the south.

The cross slab, which is broken at the top and leans at a slight angle, stands about 1.3m high by 0.5m wide and 0.3m thick [Fig. 10.2]. It has been suggested that it may have been re-set, upside down. The slab has been roughly dressed, with, on its east face, in low relief, an upright cross by three horizontal bars creating a triple Latin cross. The shaft and the arms of the crosses are outlined by bead moulding and there is a raised moulding around the edge of the slab. A photograph of the cross slab as it appeared in the early part of the century accompanies J. D. Cairns' account of the island (Cairns 1912-13. 418-9).

The cross slab belongs to the Early Christian period. It is difficult to assign it to a precise date or to produce a very close parallel. Several stones from Iona bear more than one cross on the same face (RCAHMS 1982. 181, 183) [Fig. 10.3], but they are not linked together as at Isle Martin. Refer-



Fig. 10.2 Cross-slab, Isle Martin — an upright shaft with three horizontal shafts creating a triple Latin cross. 1988.

ence may also be made to the grave slabs on Isle Maree where, on one stone, the crosses are linked together [Fig. 6.4].

TANERA MORE

The island of Tanera More lies about 1 km off the Coigach peninsula, facing Badentarbat [Fig. 10.5]. It is irregular in shape measuring about 2.7km north-south, and 1-2km east-west, and consists of a number of rocky hills, the largest of which rises to a height of 124m (406ft). A large bay, nowadays known as the Anchorage (Gael. *an acarsaid*), lies on the east side of the island. It was an anchorage evidently well-known to the Scandinavians who named the island after it (ON *t-hafnar-ey*, Gael. *tannara*, harbour island). In the late 18th century this was the site of a fishing station, providing facilities for the herring catch, and from this period date the impressive

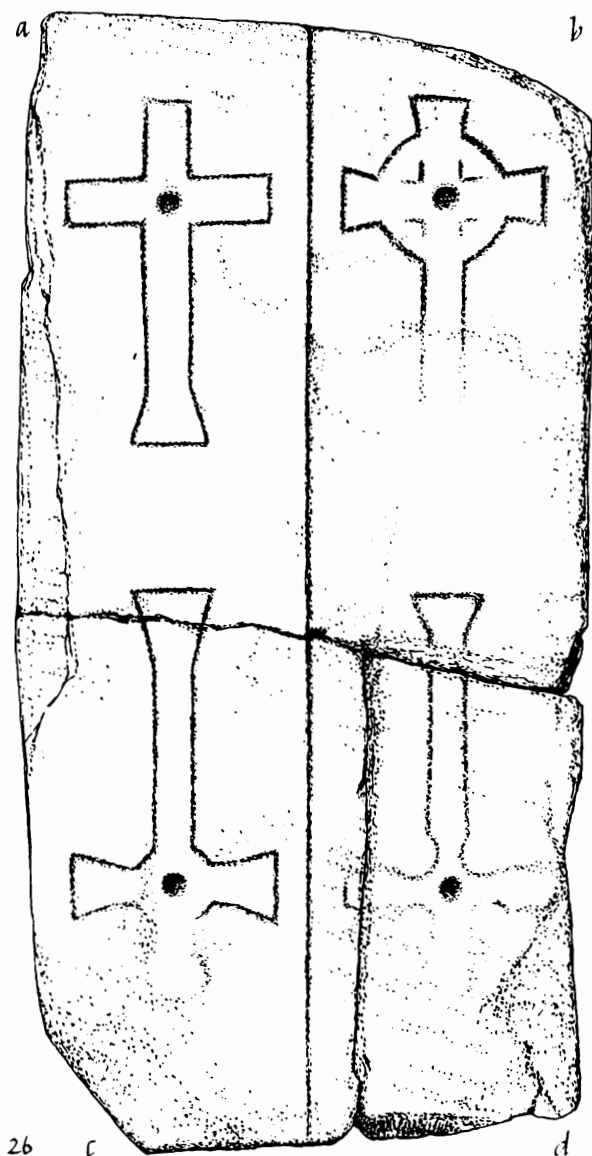


Fig. 10.3 Cross-slab, Iona Abbey Museum. The stone bears more than one cross on the same face, but they are not linked as on Isle Martin.



Fig. 10.4 The Summer Isles lie off Coigach in the mouth of Loch Broom. Tanera Mór (with Eilean Dubh behind), Tanera Beg (with An Chleirach behind) and Glas-Leac Mór. From Meall an Fheadain, 1972.

stone buildings near the pier, recorded in a view by Daniell [Fig. 12.3]. In 1939 this area was acquired by Frank Fraser Darling who described the island and its topography in his book *Island Farm* (1943).

The first mention of a burial ground on Tanera More, other than by the Ordnance Survey, seems to have been by Fraser Darling who describes it as a small triangular half-acre of ground, in use as a burial ground until late in the 19th century with graves marked by rough unlettered pieces of stone. The earliest inscribed stone yet found is dated 1790, and a number of other gravestones confirm that the cemetery was in use until the late 19th century. Fraser Darling tells how he found small crumbly fragments of human bone in the soil and judged the site to be one of great antiquity. He relates (1943. 42-3) that:

in olden days people were brought from the mainland to be buried in Tanera More. There were several reasons for this, one being the freedom from wild beasts and dogs which tended to dig up graves. And another reason applied to the period when the resurrection men were busy stealing corpses from wherever they could for the anatomists.

There is no mention of any tradition of a church or chapel on the island. The centre of the medieval and later parish was at Clachan, at the head of Loch Broom, whilst earlier Christian presence centred on Annat (across Loch Broom on the north side of the Scoraig peninsula) and on Kildonan (Little Loch Broom).



On 31 March 1988, whilst finalizing arrangements for the Scottish Society for Northern Studies' Ullapool Conference, John Baldwin visited Tanera More and discovered in the burial ground part of a medieval gravestone. Sunlight coming from the south-west, over the low *bealach*, had picked out parts of the relief carving on the recumbent stone, and an initial sketch was made. When members of the conference visited the island the following week the stone was confirmed as the lower part of a cross-marked grave slab of unusual form, and the description which follows is based on a brief examination in the field at that time [Figs. 10.6, 10.7].

The fragment measures about 1.35m in length, 0.25m in width and 0.09m in thickness. It bears the shaft of what is presumed to be a cross standing on a stepped base. The cross shaft appears in low relief and the Calvary mount on which it stands is emphasised by two further rows of incised lines reflecting the design of the base. Below the stepped base is a much weathered scene. Immediately beneath the base is a horizontal figure wearing a short tunic. Under this is a centrally placed figure, again in a short tunic, grasping a large cross which has slightly splayed arms. To the left is an apparently seated figure holding some form of staff-like implement. Below this is a low shape which may represent an animal. The degree of weathering makes the identification of these figures difficult and consequently any interpretation is more than usually speculative. Below the figural scene the stone is roughly dressed. It is uncertain whether the stone was originally an upright slab set into the ground or a recumbent grave cover. The presence of a rough area at the base would suggest the former.

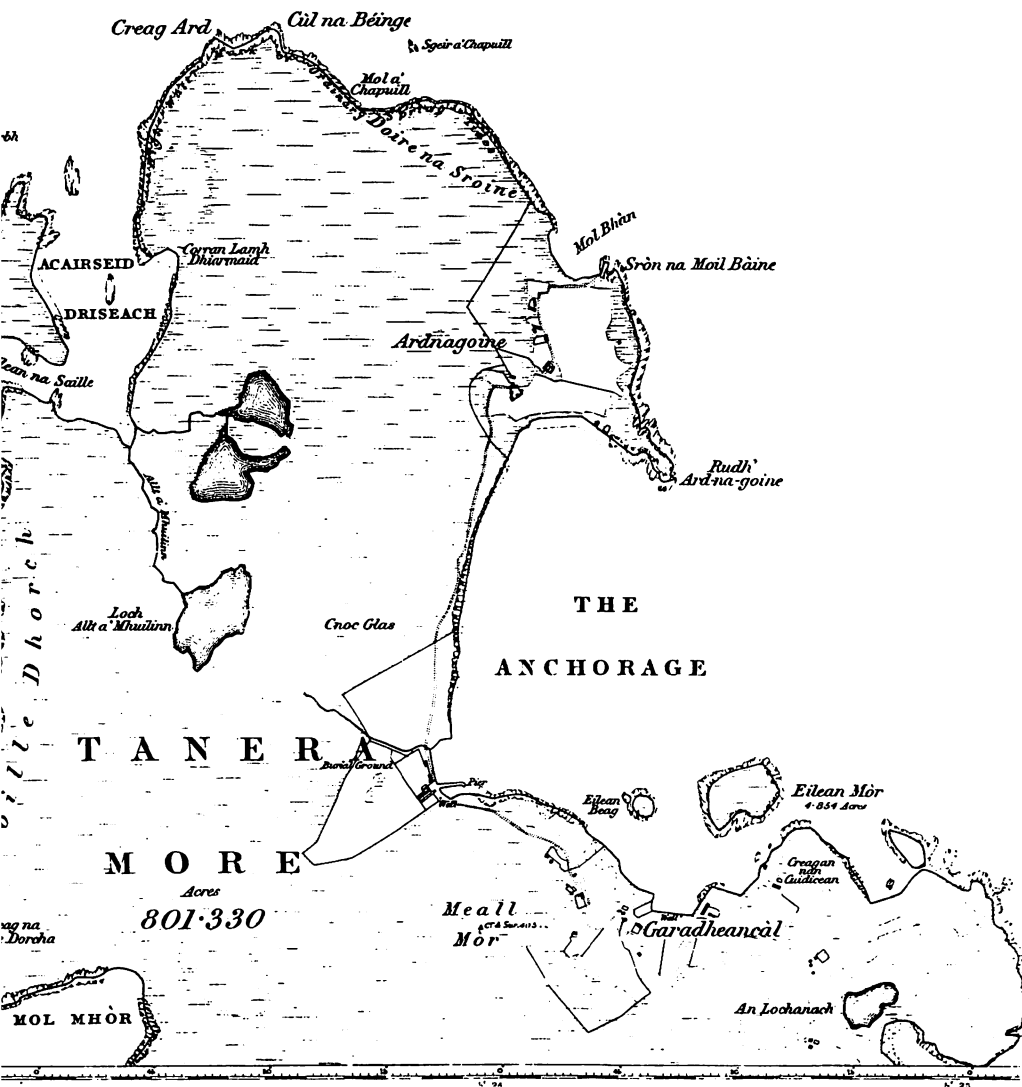
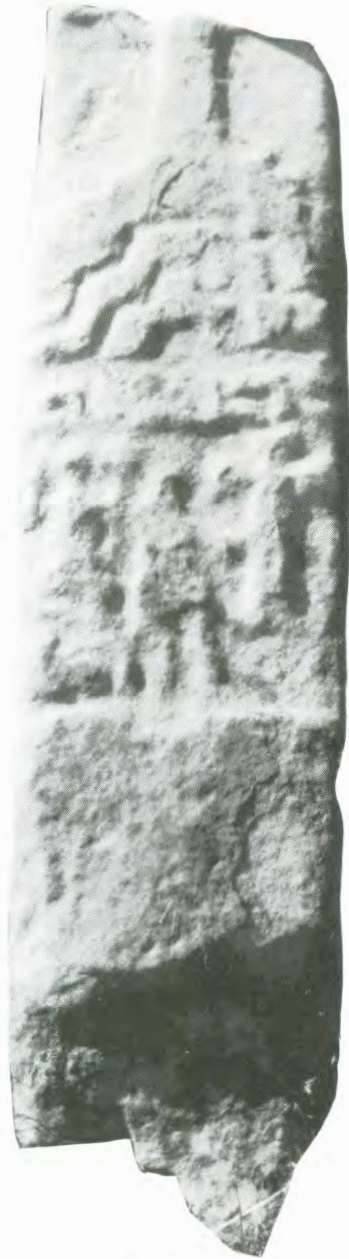
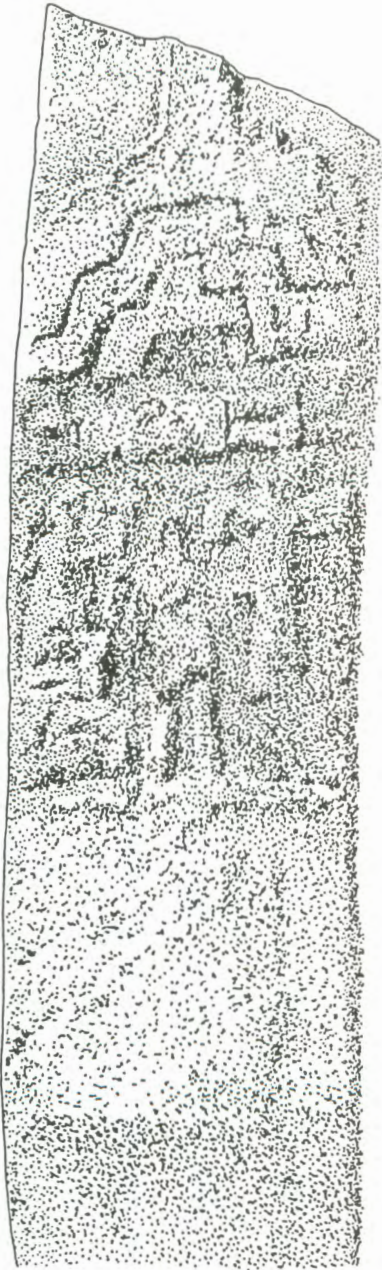


Fig. 10.5 Tanera Mór. The 18th-19th century fishing station was based at the pier. The cross-slab was discovered in the 'Burial Ground' in 1988. The same year a very large and substantial steatite bowl was uncovered by a mechanical digger on Rudh' Ard-na-goine. OS 6 inch Sheet IIIA, 1st edition, surveyed 1875.



Figs. 10.6; 10.7 The recumbent cross-marked grave-slab on Tanera Mór, probably 12th-14th century AD. At one time it may have been an upright cross-slab. The drawing [Fig. 10.6] is based on the photograph and field-notes, 1988.

The stepped base links it with the broad current of sepulchral monuments in Britain. The form is common from the 12th to the 14th century and is known in numerous examples throughout Scotland. The volume of material has perhaps precluded attempts to carry out a survey of these types of monuments on a countrywide basis this century, although Richard Gough's magnificent *Sepulchral Monuments of Great Britain* published in 1786 provided an inspiring example (Gough 1786: see also Steer & Bannerman 1977; Ryder 1987). References to medieval grave slabs with stepped bases occur in the pages of MacGibbon and Ross (1896) under the ecclesiastical monuments they are describing, and the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* in the 19th and particularly the early 20th centuries contain papers dealing with this type of material as a part of studies of individual districts. The most relevant geographically to the example under discussion are those in Ross-shire, but none of these, as they survive, are a very close parallel to the slab on Tanera More, although they do provide evidence for comparable monuments in the area — for example at Urray, Convith, Killearnan, Contin and Kilmore (Rae MacDonald 1901-2. 688-732; MacLean 1914-15. 71-8; Grant 1908-9. 335-6).

Steer and Bannerman briefly mention a number of grave slabs in Argyll, which they date to the 13th and 14th centuries (one of which from Kilmartin has a stepped base) and derive these from English forerunners. They comment on a scarcity of such monuments in Argyll, and would use this as an argument in favour of the rapid replacement of the form by the products of the West Highland schools (Steer & Bannerman 1977. 14).

The fragment from Tanera More can be compared in size with, for example, a section of a cross shaft from Iona which measures up to 0.28m in width and 0.07m in thickness (RCAHMS 1982. 237). The stepped Calvary mount is the commonest form of cross base on cross slab grave covers, but the internal repetition of the stepped cross base is a rare feature recorded, for instance, from Kirby-in-Ashfield, Nottinghamshire (Gough 1786. 1. cviii). The presence of a scene below the cross base is also very unusual. Ryder discusses an *Agnus Dei* at the foot of a cross shaft at Sedgfield and draws parallels with examples from Great Milton in Oxfordshire and Wainsworth near Doncaster. He also cites a double-headed eagle and a robed figure inside the bases on a double grave slab at Barnard Castle, a possible heraldic dog from Bowes, and a Gainford example with small ornamental crosses below and to each side of the base. There is a 'beast', also, at the foot of a cross base from Bristol (Ryder 1987; Gough 1786. cix). However, Ryder records no figural scene comparable with that at Tanera.

The subject of the scene on the slab must, owing to its condition, be unclear. The figures in association with the cross recall the iconography of the True Cross as illustrated on the 12th century Kelloe Cross [Fig. 10.8]. The subject is extensively discussed by James Lang who refers to the mainly continental parallels (Lang 1977. 105-19). This free-standing cross was erected in the modest church of St Helen at Kelloe, County Durham. In the centre of its lowest panel is a large cross flanked by a crowned woman



Fig. 10.8 The Invention of the True Cross, St. Helens Church, Kelloe, Co. Durham.

holding a sword, and on the left a male figure holding a spade in his right hand and supporting a half-shrouded figure with his left. Two prostrate, shrouded corpses lie along the base of the panel. It is interpreted as showing

Fig. 10.9 Grave slab, Iona Abbey Museum. A priest in eucharistic vestments prays in front of an altar on which are a chalice and a ring-headed cross with a stepped base.



the Empress Helena threatening the Jew, Judas, who then digs to find the three crosses. The true one restores a corpse to life. The figure on the left of the Tanera More slab, holding an object which more resembles a sceptre than a sword, could be that of a woman. The central figure is depicted in a short tunic, indicating a male, probably lay, person. The recumbent figure at the top of the scene, but below the cross base, may represent a corpse. Another, quite different interpretation is suggested by a slab in the Abbey Museum at Iona (RCAHMS 1982. 222-3) [Fig. 10.9] which depicts a priest in eucharistic vestments, standing in an attitude of prayer before an altar on which are a chalice and ring-headed cross with a stepped base; the figure at Tanera More, however, seems to be holding the cross, but may be taking part in another liturgical scene. Poor preservation and the crudity of the carving prevent any certainty and leave the way open for other interpretations.

Elsewhere in the graveyard is a roughly-shaped stone of irregular form, about 1.65m in length, and there are slight indications of the former presence of a building, about 7m in length, aligned roughly east-west within the churchyard.

This discovery shows the need for more detailed survey in this area and points to the rewarding nature of future work. The Tanera and Isle Martin stones form an important part of the early ecclesiastical history of the north-west coast.

Acknowledgement

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