

Barra: encountering angels



Barra together with causeway-linked Vatersay are the southernmost inhabited isles in the Outer Hebrides.

The isle derives its name from St Barr or St Finnbar, who may be Finnbar of Cork, a young contemporary of St Columba.

However, its occupation is earlier, evidenced by remains from a Neolithic site dating from c. 4000BC at Allt Easdale.

Today Barra is the ancestral seat of Clan MacNeil, the seat of which is Kisimul Castle. This iconic landmark is a welcoming sight for seafarers approaching the southern port and main settlement of Castlebay.

Rising above Castlebay is Heaval, the peak of Barra, from where fine views of the north-south stretching archipelago may be seen. In 1954, a white Carrara marble statue of the Madonna and Child was placed on the southwestern flank of Heaval, conveying a feeling of presence and protection.



The airport to the north is a second entry point, and the world's only airport where scheduled flights use a tidal beach.

Just to the north of the airport is Cill Bharra, an ancient chapel site with graveyard. Today the site has the remains of a late medieval chapel, and two post-medieval chapels, one of which was re-roofed c. 1980.

Housed in this re-roofed chapel are three fine late medieval grave slabs in the Iona tradition, and the replica of an earlier Norse cross slab (right), the original being on display in the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh.



For me, the gems of Cill Bharra are the three early medieval crosses which lie scattered in the surrounding graveyard. They confirm the sacred nature of this site over 1200-1400 years. I remember first encountering them, and sensing through two of the ancient stones, a contemporary angelic presence.

Angels are understood as messengers of God, whose role includes watching over us, providing protection and direction.

For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.
Psalm 91

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised, for God's angelic protecting presence, known by the Psalmist, is neither limited to place or time, and may still be encountered, not least through testing days.

