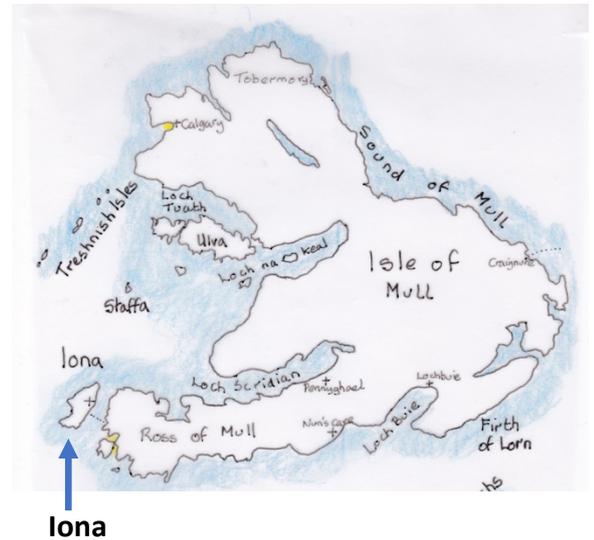


Iona: Columba's Shrine and Pillow

In 563, Columba and 12 companions set out from Ireland in a curragh, a wood-structured, skin-covered craft, beaching on the southern shores of Iona, to the west of Mull.



Some say Columba was fleeing, for there is a story of a dispute over his copying a book of psalms without permission, but many view his motivation was not 'push', but 'pull', responding to a call to be a pilgrim.



In his day, long before the emergence of the parish church system, the monastery was one of the most significant expressions of Christian community. The monastic movement has its genesis in north Africa, typically focused in remote places; landscape-wise a desert and people-wise, deserted. The choice of location being in part influenced by the path Jesus took in entering the wilderness prior to beginning his public ministry, and in part by the wilderness experience of the tribes of Israel.

In time, the monastery developed, with cells to work and sleep, a place for community life including preparing meals, eating and worship, all surrounded by an earth embankment. The vallum, as it is known was both a physical boundary and a spiritual one, separating the secular world from the sacred haven. The monastic site was hallowed by the community in Columba's time and through successive centuries, imbuing the setting with a sacred quality.

Today's Abbey site is the most significant Christian place in the Hebrides, which we'll explore in the coming weeks. For now, I invite you to pause before one place, Columba's Shrine (below left) and one stone, Columba's Pillow (below right). The shrine was rebuilt in the 1960s, though the foundations on which it rests date to the 800s or 900s. Sitting in the shadow of (the replica) St John's Cross, was it a final resting place of Columba?



The Abbey complex also houses a stone bearing a carved cross. Known as Columba's Pillow, this is a holy stone, and marker of a holy place.

The Old Testament has a story of Jacob, who whilst fleeing from his brother, lays his head down on a stone at sunset to rest. As he slept, he dreamt of a ladder connecting to heaven, with angels descending and ascending. He heard the voice of God speak, promising to be with him, wherever he goes, and to bring him back safely to his land. In the morning he anointed the pillow with oil, and named the place Bethel, meaning the house of God.



Columba died on 9th June 597 and was probably buried within the vallum. Like Jacob's Pillow at Bethel, might Columba's Pillow and Shrine mark where heaven touched earth, the divine touched the mortal, and Iona became a house of God?

The psalmist writes:

The Lord will keep you going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore (Psalm 121).

Consecrated in Columba's days, pilgrims still come seeking, and many speak of a holy dwelling.