

**BEACON HILL RE-VISITED:
A re-assessment of the 1969 excavations**

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In Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories — which of course all right-thinking readers know by heart — there is a significant moment when Holmes tests Dr Watson by asking him to state how many steps there are, going upstairs at 221b Baker Street. Poor Watson, who must have climbed this hundreds of times, has no idea; whereupon Holmes makes the famous remark 'You **see**, but you do not **observe**'. This brief contribution to the record of Lundy's past illustrates something that is not uncommon in archaeological work. In 1969, during the minor excavation within the Beacon Hill burial-ground, I **saw**, and noted, drew and photographed; but it was not before 1990 that a fresh analysis of the archive allowed me to **observe**.

Seen, as it so often is, from the coast of South Wales, Lundy has occupied various roles in early Welsh belief. A triadic poem names **Teir Rac Ynys** 'Three Adjacent Islands' (of Britain), starting with **Mon a Manaw** 'Anglesey and Man' and going on to **Ynys Weir**. Though it has been suggested that Ynys Weir is the Isle of Wight, it must be Lundy (Bromwich 1961, 228-32). It was an Island Other-world, prison of a legendary Gweir or Gwair. There will have been a name for Lundy in the Late British speech of what became Devon and Cornwall, but it has been lost. In actual, as opposed to mythological, terms, Lundy's most likely link with any part of South Wales is indicated by the earlier two of the four inscribed memorial-stones now preserved at Beacon Hill. These, with O/P/TIMI, and (circle)/REST/EUTA, can be seen epigraphically as having been carved and set up at the end of the 5th century — say, around AD 500 — using Roman capital letters disposed horizontally. They tell us several things immediately. Their style is of a Latinate tradition, one of sub-Roman British and Christian Gaulish character; not the style of most inscribed stones in south Wales and south-west Britain, derived as these are in the main from Irish models of commemorative memorials. Names on their own in the genitive — and O/P/TIMI is to be read as "the memorial of Optimus" (which is an attested name; Jones *et al* 1971-80: i,721) — are almost certainly, at this date, for memorials of clerics, priests or members of religious communities who avoid mention of earthly parentage. (RESTEUTA is not the Roman **Restituta**, but a British (Celtic) name, gender uncertain, with an element **rest-** also found in Old Breton names.) The third stone, POTITI "Of Potitus" with an encircled cross, is later 6th century. Its encircled cross seems to imitate the O of Optimus and the separate circle above Resteuta, and I think it entirely probable (fig. 1) that in both, a simple hooked cross or **chi-rho** form was originally painted or blacked in (see Thomas 1981, figs 3, 4, 6, 21).

What are these stones doing here at this early date? The only convincing explanation would be that Lundy was, from a little before AD 500, a small outlying monastic establishment in a naturally isolated position. If so, this is far too early to expect a mother-establishment on the adjoining mainland; in Devon and Cornwall the sole really early monastery of which we know is the **monasterium quod Docco vocatur** "the monastery that is called of-Docco, Docco's" in the 7th-century Life of St Samson (see Olson 1989, chap.ii). Samson, from south-west Wales, visited Cornwall briefly circa AD 520-530, and this — Landocco, near the present St. Kew — had from the text not long been founded. However a more likely stimulus for an outpost on Lundy would have been Welsh; St Illtud's monastery at Llanilltud-fawr (Llantwit) near the Glamorgan coast, for example, had precisely such an annexe at St Piro's **insula**, Ynys Byr, now Caldey Island off the Pembroke Coast (Evans 1971).

On the top of the Lundy plateau, the Beacon Hill graveyard despite 19th-century remodelling by Trinity House still shows, on its south-west side, remains of a curvilinear

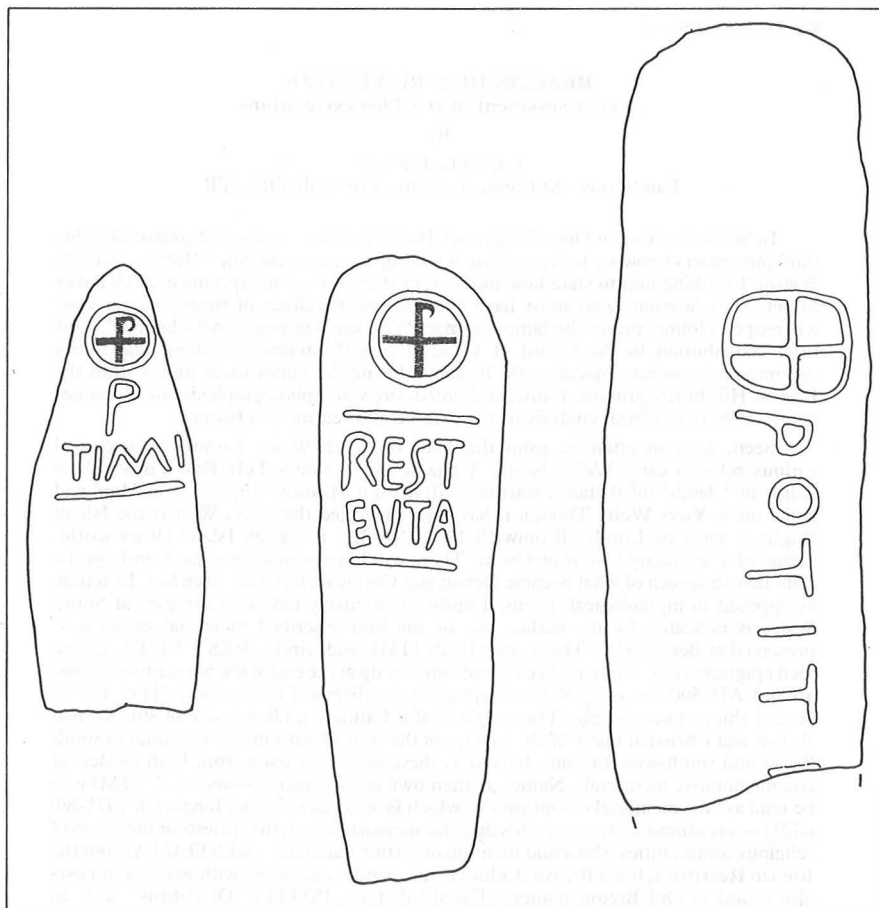


Fig 1: Inscribed memorial stones, Beacon Hill, possible sequence; the added crosses in the circles on the first two are hypothetical, but may originally have been painted in.

enclosing bank and slight outer ditch (fig. 2). This need not be a primary enclosure — indeed a section in 1969 suggested that it was constructed after the first burials (say, 7th century?) — nor need we suppose that a monastic settlement was placed here in this exposed spot; it was far more likely to have been in a more sheltered locality on the island, awaiting discovery. What makes Beacon Hill so interesting is the presence of no less than four inscribed stones. The fourth, largest but incomplete, dates to *c.* 600 - 650, with . . . IGERNI/ (FIL)I TIGERNI; it is of the Insular type by then current in north Cornwall and west Devon, commemorating some mainland notable whose body was ferried to the sacred isle. The aim of the limited 1969 excavations at Beacon Hill was to confirm, if possible, the Early Christian origin of the site and to see if any original socket-holes for these inscribed memorials could be located. As it turned out, the latter objective proved impossible; records of position are too uncertain and there has been too much disturbance.

However, also in 1969, Professor Peter Fowler was informally surveying the remains of early field-banks and hut circles south and west of Beacon Hill, showing that at least one former lynchet bank ran underneath the centre of the burial-ground. This offers a starting point, in this present paper, for the sequence of events revealed in the major central area-cutting, itself intended to expose the feature implied by a row of large granite slabs protruding through the rough grass. Five clear episodes or phases can be presented. All archaeological results are pragmatically divisible into two parts. The first is **discovery**; the outcome will only ever be as good as the excavator, and his or her technical planning and skill, but the making of as full and as objective a record as possible should in part compensate for the inevitable destruction of irreplaceable evidence. The second part is **interpretation**. Logical inference should be the first guideline but, notably so for the Early Christian period, an equally valuable guide is a thorough acquaintance with a vast array of analogous sites and material, and the accompanying literature. The two stages correspond to Sherlock Holmes's "seeing" and "observing". At the end of the 1969 work, composing immediate reports (Thomas, Fowler & Gardner 1969a; 1969b;), it could be stated that Beacon Hill was an early burial-ground, probably originally ovoid in plan; that there was a central feature, marked by the large slabs; that this feature showed a complex process of use and re-use; and that the likely date for the foundations of the small chapel was the 12th or 13th century. It had also been found that the central feature was built above a small area of rather earlier, secular, occupation marked by pottery, a few stone objects and a stone-lined drain, probably a living-hut adjoining the traces of a field bank.

The treatment of the Christian dead is not and never has been a process governed by rationalism, logic and physical determinism. Geographers may delude themselves that early churches are sited with reference to valley-bottoms or heights above Ordnance Datum, but the literature makes it abundantly clear that a site could be selected simply because it had no other economic use, or because someone thought that he or she had experienced a vision there. In 1990, after going through several hundred slides of the 1969 excavations — studied, at length, on a giant wide screen! — a fresh interpretation of the evidence was impressed on my research assistant Carl Thorpe (who had been re-drawing all the plans) and myself; we were then able to confirm it from the other records. I give that interpretation here, all but the final identification (for which see a forthcoming book: Thomas in press).

Phase 1 (fig. 3)

Near the centre of the Beacon Hill enclosure, related to the one-time system of small fields in this immediate area, was a circular hut (or "hut circle") with an internal diameter of the order of 8m. Like innumerable such huts on the uplands of Devon and Cornwall, it would have had double-faced walls of granite slabs and blocks with a rubble core, and probably internal post-holes (though the digging did not proceed to this level except within individual grave-pits) (cf. Fox 1973, figs 27 to 31). A drainage gully with a few slabs still over it, and the upper half of a small rotary-quern sitting on one, led downhill (southwards) and the doorway may have been on the SW side. The extent of the interior was, we found on plotting all the small finds, quite closely defined by the position of numerous eroded sherds; this pottery was generally coarse and undistinguished, native ware with rims imitating Romano-British forms. Though the nearest comparable material comes from sites on Dartmoor or Mendip, a date in the 3rd-4th centuries AD can be assumed. In loose social terms, this was a peasant home, albeit a fairly large and perhaps stoutly-built one.

Phase 2 (fig. 4)

When Beacon Hill was selected to serve as a Christian burial-area, we can only assume that the hut, and probably the whole associated complex of other huts and fields, had gone out of use, or that this part of it had been abandoned. The hut's double-faced walls, however, would have still been standing and visible, and as such they offered a convenient supply of stone. The walls were dismantled. The larger granite slabs were used to build a roughly rectangular feature, externally about 3.5m north-south and about 2.5m east-west. On the west side, some up-ended slabs formed the wall; on the south, a single very large slab; on the east, granite chunks were placed in two courses.

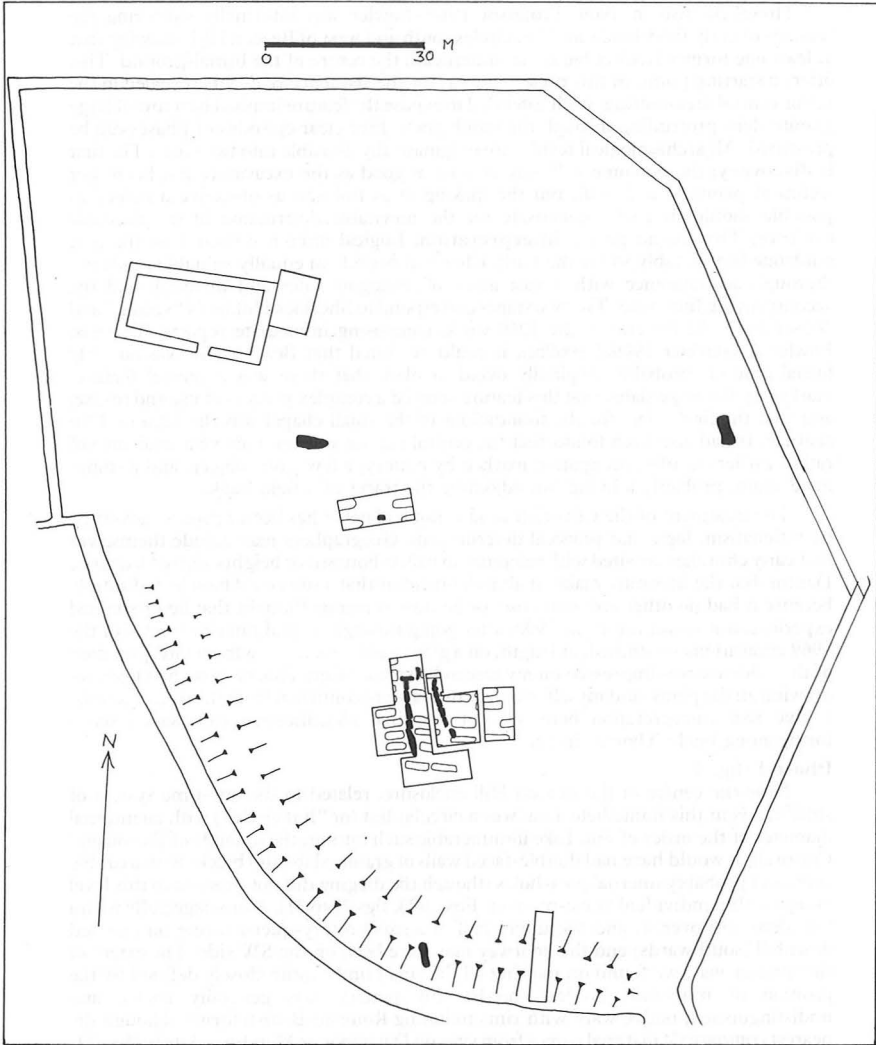


Fig. 2: Beacon Hill, simplified plan, showing positions of the 1969 excavation cuttings (foundations of the medieval chapel, top left).

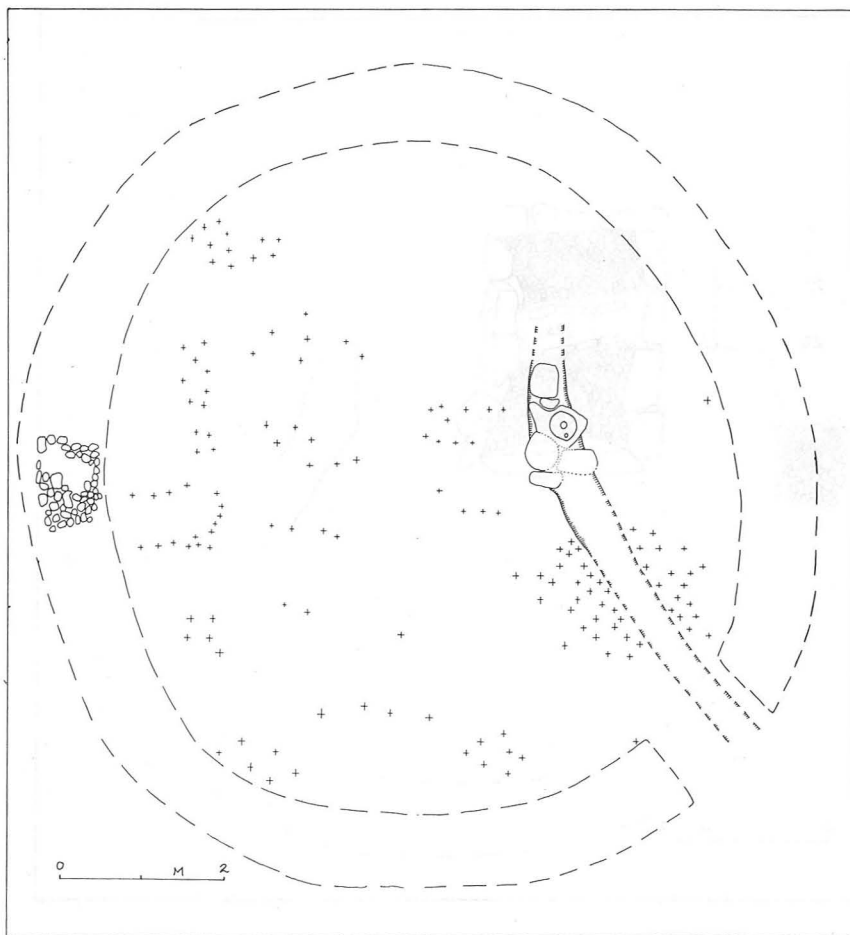


Fig. 3: Phase 1 — reconstructed plan of hut-circle.

Within this feature or setting, something that can be called a **cella** or “cell”, a cist-grave was constructed — no. 23 on the plan. It was given granite side-slabs and covering slabs, but the inner faces of the large stones forming the walls of the **cella** acted as end-slabs. When the grave was complete and the burial was contained in it, several tons of smaller stones — apple to grapefruit size — were heaped over the grave, filling the interior of the **cella** to an estimated depth or height of about a metre. These would have come from the rubble core of the hut’s walls, and other walling-stones were probably strewn around. At one point alone, just west of the south edge of the **cella**, a compacted patch of the base of this rubble-fill, sitting on the old land surface, was left, and a fire was lit here. The soil was in part baked and reddened, tiny individual specks of charcoal could be seen, and the granite stones were oxidised and fire-cracked. Recognising at once that such an elaborate grave-surround should imply a dead Christian of special importance, we

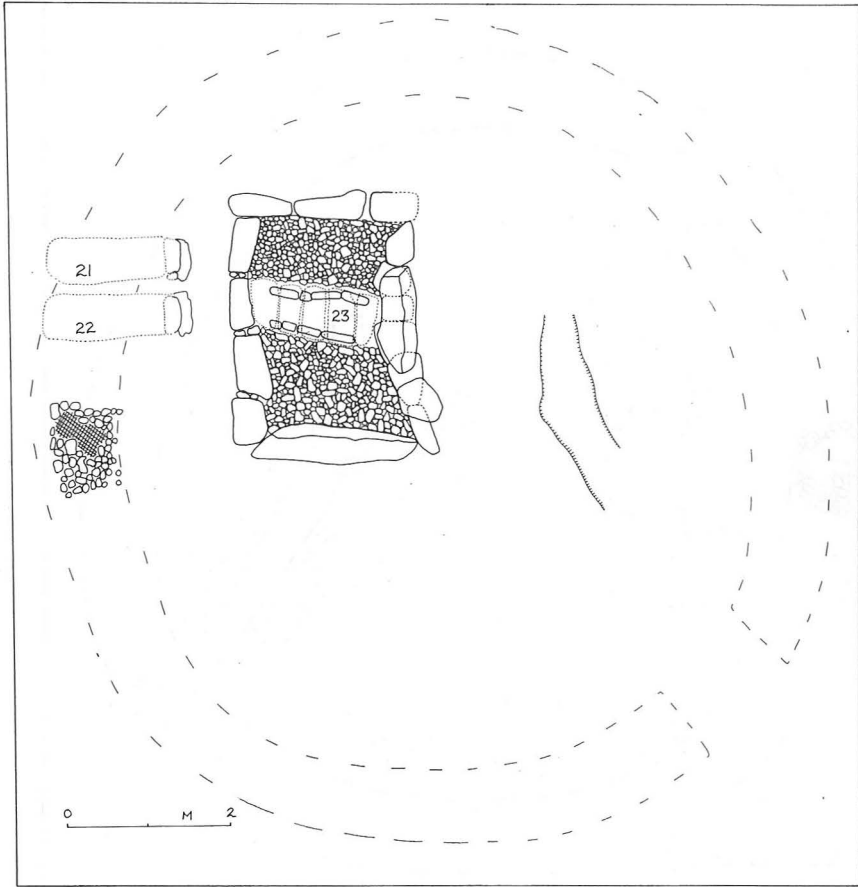


Fig. 4: Phase 2 — construction of the cella for grave 23.

might expect to find subsequent graves placed as near it as possible, to share in prayers for the deceased and to participate in the certainty of a physical resurrection. Graves no. 21 and 22, of which only the east ends were exposed, are relevant. Extrapolating from the areas opened in 1969, Beacon Hill may contain as many as two to three hundred burials between the 6th and 20th centuries. No. 23, in the **cella**, was not the first burial of all. Without going into long historical reasons for this, it could be assigned to circa AD 550 (give or take a decade), a half-century after burials associated with the Optimus and Pesteuta memorials. None the less the **cella**, its exact position initially dictated by the siting of the deserted hut as a suitable source for stones, formed a 6th-century focus for the cemetery.

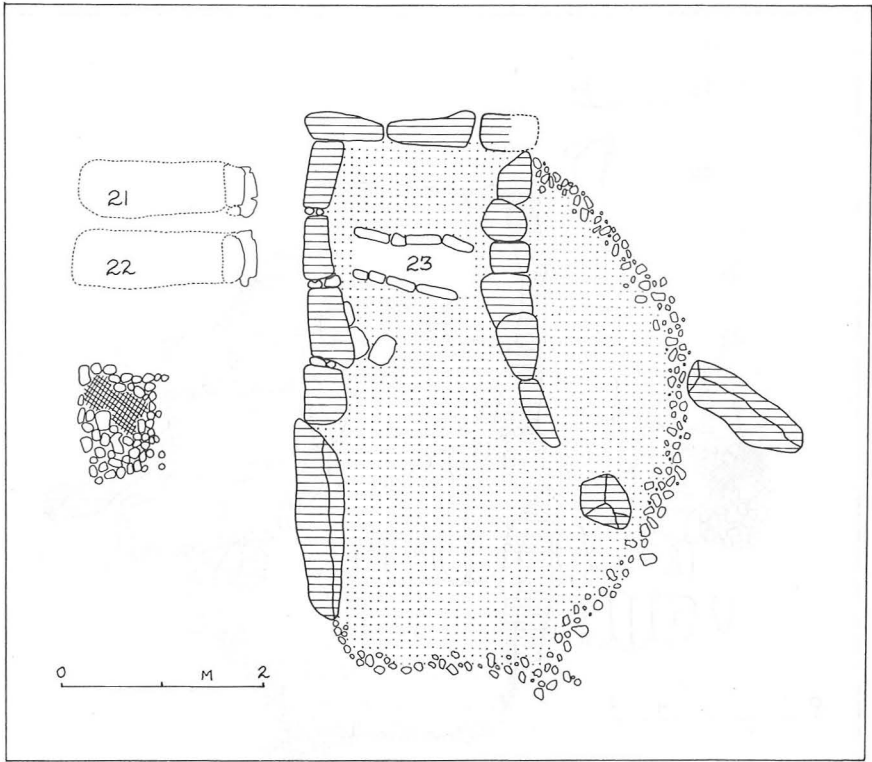


Fig. 5: Phase 3 — re-opening of the cella, and grave 23.

Phase 3 (fig. 5)

Some while after the building of the **cella**, this structure was partly dismantled. The very large slab forming its southern end was wrenched around through 90 degrees, and left propped upright against the south end of the west wall. On the east side, the upper row of large granite chunks forming the wall was taken down, the stones being placed on the surface away from the wall. The point of this partial demolition was to enable most of the contained mound of small stones to be thrown, kicked or shovelled outwards; the spread was fairly closely defined, and could be checked again in 1990 because each grave was extensively photographed. When nearly all the mound had been removed, spread out to the east and south, the initial grave no. 23 was exposed. Its cover slabs were taken off, and left just south of the cist-grave, lying on the lowest layer of rubble. Clearly the aim was to uncover the original burial, though — in a rough sort of way — without damaging the **cella** more than was needed to bring this about.

Phase 4 (fig. 6)

It is impossible to allot exact positions in the sequence to all the individual, numbered, graves, but the general progression is clear. Further cist-graves were now attracted to the **focus** of the **cella**, even devoid of its original occupant. On the west side, 4, 19 and 18 joined the row with 21 and 22. The three graves 1, 2 and 3 — from their

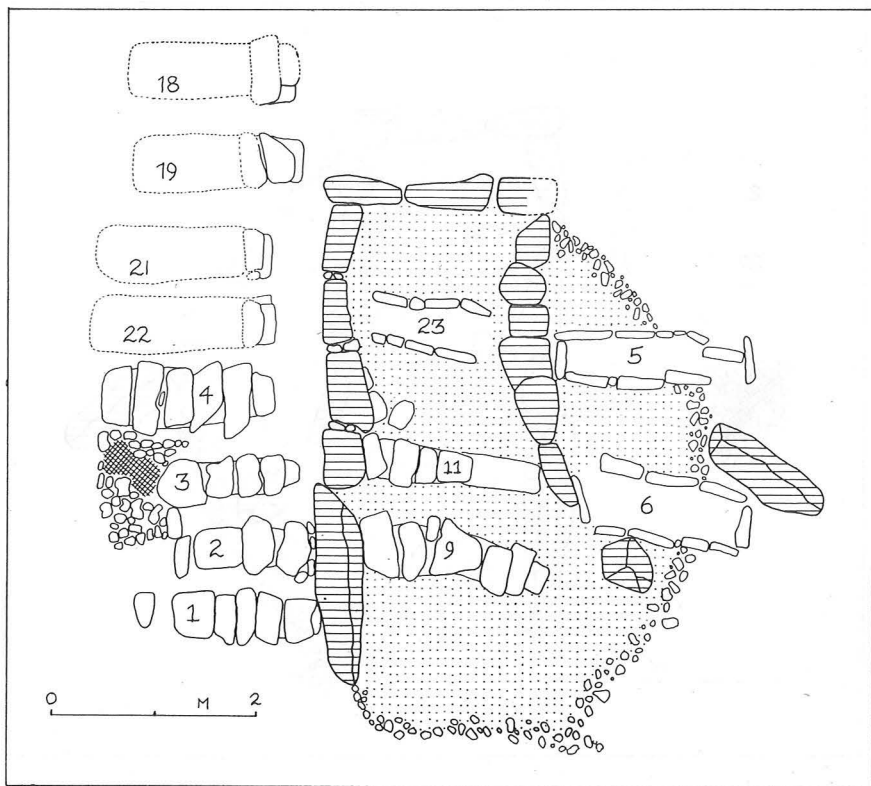


Fig. 6: Phase 4 — further burials around the opened cella, and in the spread of the mound of stones.

smaller dimensions, the graves of children — seem to belong to this post-destruction phase. Grave 3 cuts into the small burnt area. Graves 1 and 2 were built right up against the re-positioned south-end large slab. Four more graves, nos. 5, 6, 11 and 9, were constructed south and east of the **cella**. In all four, the hollows for the stone-built cists were sunk, 30 to 50cm deep, **into** the spread of the rubble from within the **cella**. Between graves 5 and 6 this rubble reached to the top of the side-slabs.

Phase 5 (fig. 7)

All the remaining burials are further accretions to the same focus. At the north-east corner, no. 20 was made by partly removing an end-slab from the **cella** surround. Graves 7, 8, 12, 13 and 14 were added on the east side. No. 12 was built in the (shallow) spread of rubble here, and small stones were jammed in between the cover-slabs over it. Note also that graves 5 and 6 slightly overlay the former drainage gully in the floor of the dismantled hut. On the south side, graves 10 and 17, 15 and 16, were 'double' or 'tandem' graves, end-to-end cists sharing a medial end-slab. It is possible that further graves might have been found, but those shown here are all those noticed in the excavated area.

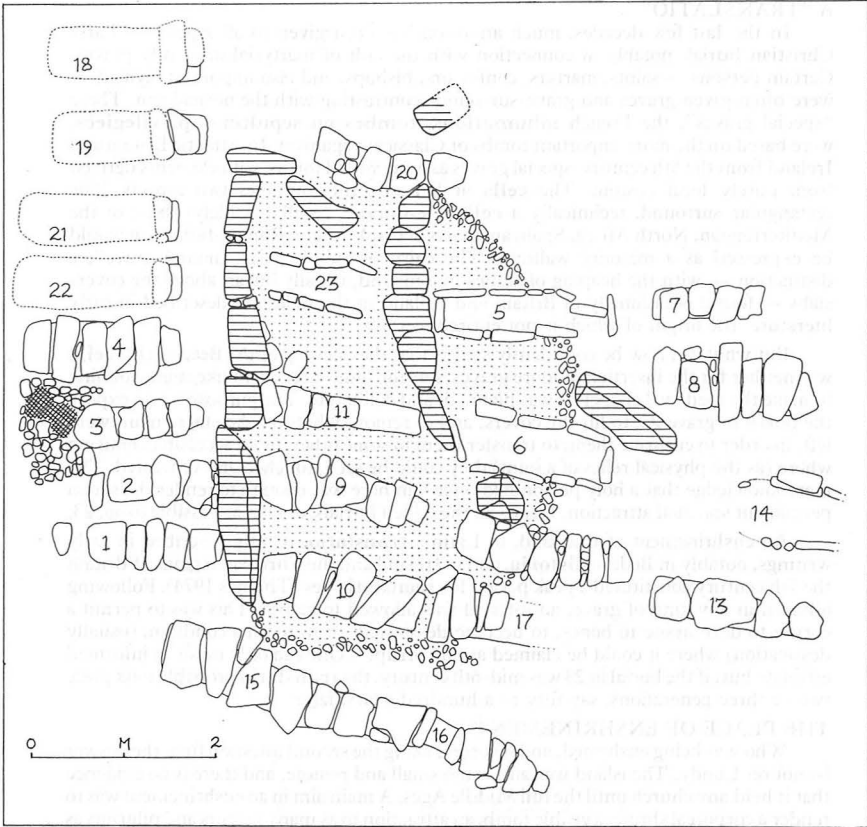


Fig. 7: Phase 5 — final stage of additional burials around cella.

CHRONOLOGY

Even if the 1969 work, undertaken by a university department, had not been conducted with a minimal budget there were no chances to obtain absolute dates. The sequence here is relative, based on a direct stratification. No bone nor organic matter of any kind survived; the hut may have had an internal hearth but, with any post-holes, this would not have been found without removing all the graves, the rubble spread and the central *cella* (which was, at the end of the work, re-constituted and backfilled).

In 1969 it was assumed, too readily, that the partial dismantling of the *cella* was the result of pious enthusiasm; a desire on the part of those who made graves 20 and 10 to bury their dead as closely as possible to the occupant of the *cella* (or occupants, since at first graves 9 and 11 were thought to be broadly contemporary with 23). This formed a suitable, *pro tempore*, spiritual explanation, but it was not the correct archaeological one. In fact the only loose chronological indicators were as follows: (i) occupation of the hut — from the pottery, Late Roman, 3rd century if not 4th; (ii) commencement as burial-ground, assumed for the epigraphic date of the two oldest memorials, c.500 (or, for OPTIMI, c.490 - 500); (iii) construction of the *cella*, from an external historical source thought to be mid-6th century; (iv) dismantling of the *cella*, at some stage after this.

A "TRANSLATIO"

In the last few decades, much attention has been given to all aspects of Early Christian burial, notably in connection with the cult of martyrial or saintly graves. Certain persons — saints, martyrs, confessors, bishops, and also important laymen — were often given graves and grave-surrounds contrasting with the normal run. These "special graves", the French **inhumations, tombes ou sépultures privilégiées**, were based on the more important tombs of Classical paganism. In Atlantic Britain and Ireland from the 5th century, special graves assume varied forms, with elements derived from purely local custom. The **cella** at Beacon Hill combines two aspects. The rectangular surround, technically a **cella memoriae**, recalls (crudely) those of the Mediterranean, North Africa, Spain and parts of Gaul (where, Roman-fashion, it would be expressed as a masonry walling). The cairn of rubble is a "mound grave", a distinction — with the heaping of stones in a mound, usually linear, above the cover-slabs — found occasionally in Britain and Ireland in the field and described in early literature, the origin of which is not entirely certain.

But what can now be confidently said is that the opening of the Beacon Hill **cella** was neither for the insertion of more graves, nor for some later event like stone-robbing to make the medieval chapel. It was planned, and deliberate. The purpose was to expose the burial in grave 23, to lift the covers, and to remove whatever skeletal remains were left, in order to enshrine them; to transfer them to some other, more accessible, housing where (as the physical relics of a saint) they could be seen, touched and venerated. The mere knowledge that a holy person had once lain here was enough to render the spot a permanent spiritual attraction. Hence all the added burials, as near as possible to no. 23.

An enshrinement of this kind, in Latin a **translatio**, is fully described in early writings, notably in Bede's **Historia**, and in Ireland and the Christian regions of Britain the 7th century constituted a peak period for **translationes** (Thomas 1974). Following a burial in any kind of grave, an interval was allowed to elapse. This was to permit a corpse to decompose to bones, to become desiccated, or to reach a condition (usually desiccation) where it could be claimed as "incorrupt". One can only make an informed estimate but, if the burial in 23 was mid-6th century, the **translatio** probably took place two or three generations, say fifty to a hundred years, later.

THE PLACE OF ENSHRINEMENT

Who was being enshrined, and where? Taking the second question first, the answer is: not on Lundy. The island was and is too small and remote, and there is no evidence that it held any church until the full Middle Ages. A main aim in an enshrinement was to render a corporeal shrine, a visible tomb, an attraction to as many visitors and pilgrims as possible; thus promoting the status, popularity and sanctity of whatever establishment owned the shrine. By 600 - 650, when (on the evidence of the TIGERNI memorial) Lundy was still a sacred burial-place, it is likely that any putative original link with some south-east Welsh monastery like Llantwit (or Nantcarfan, or Llandough) had been replaced by attachment to some establishment closer to Lundy. By far and away the best candidate is the fore-runner of the present church at Stoke St Nectan, Hartland, a direct sailing link between Lundy and the mainland being the still just useable landing at Hartland Quay. "Stoke" (**stoc**) is the label given to it by the incoming English around 700. Neither any early British name nor, save for some traces in the woodland north of the church, any archaeological hints of the original site are known, but a British monastery here from the late 6th century is more than just a possibility (Pearce 1985).

THE MAN IN GRAVE 23

In that case, the burial in the **cella** and the subsequent shrine at Stoke, Hartland, were for the person known as "St Nectan". His Life, the **Vita Sancta Nectani**, was composed in Latin at the newly-founded Hartland Abbey by an Augustinian cleric, English or Anglo-Norman, in the 1180s. The author knew almost nothing about Nectan, save for local traditions that were preserved from the pre-Norman church, a small community of secular canons (Grosjean 1953). However with the Life is a curious little work, the 10th-century **Inventio** ("Discovery") of the relics of Nectan, describing in wholly believable detail how the decorated stone lid of his shrine-coffin was found just below the floor inside a church. This would be in the early 10th century, probably when

such a church was enlarged though (judging from the fine font) it was later partly rebuilt by the Abbey, and then very extensively, re-modelled to form the present Stoke church in the 14th century. Nectan is depicted as the first of twenty-four sons and daughters of a Welsh king, **Brocannus**, the later “Brychan” whose name is preserved in that of the county of Brecknock (**Brycheiniog** in Welsh). The story of Nectan’s leaving Wales in a little boat for Devon, his lonely cell, his fountain (still shown near Stoke church), his two straying cows, encounter with evil robbers who cut his head off, and lastly his picking-up of his severed head and return to the cell where he expired, is a pre-Norman folktale. It is probably of Welsh origin, since much the same story is told of St Cynog, the leading Brecknockshire saint.

Is any of this factual, and does it shed any light at all on the Beacon Hill excavations? The origin in Wales, the desire to lead a religious life, the sailing south (to what would have been known, in Wales, as an island retreat) and the death in, or offshore from, Devon can all be accepted, with a date of circa 550. “Nectan” is a Goidelic or Primitive Irish word, meaning more or less “pure” or “washed” (i.e. “washed free from sin”). That it was retained in this form for so many centuries is remarkable enough, since the corresponding British form is **Nehton** or **Neithon** (and indeed any pre-English monastery at Stoke might well have been called **Lann-neithon**). The man buried in grave 23, whose remains were enshrined at Stoke — and where, moreover, the decorated lid of his 7th-century shrine was apparently still displayed in the 12th century — took the name of Nectan in his final years as a name-in-religion; just as the patron of Crediton in mainland Devon, the 7th-century Saxon lad Wynfrith, became known as **Bonifatius** or “Boniface”, apostle to the Germans. The reason for the special grave was that someone on Lundy in the 6th century knew who Nectan had been, and it was considered that such a memorial was proper to his one-time status and holy reputation. At Stoke itself, if this was known it was soon forgotten, save for the vague traditions that survived until Hartland Abbey was founded.

Now the rest of this puzzle is part of a complicated literary and historical detective-story, but a Welsh and not a Lundy story, and I give only one clue. In an obscure Welsh Latin tract, known from a single manuscript copied at Monmouth Priory about 1200, there is a miscellany of much older items, put together in the 11th century to form a narrative. Some items go back to the 9th and 8th centuries, and even before that, and some were originally written down in note-form not in Latin but in Old Welsh. One of the oldest may have been a short poem or sentence of the 7th century, telling what was known about four burials; of a grandfather who was a king and came from a long way to the west, then of two of his grandsons (one a king, one a saint), and lastly of their father, his son.

CONCLUSION

What else remains to be found out about Beacon Hill as an Early Christian cemetery? The interior has an uneven surface, and has been disturbed by occasional grave-digging over many centuries; the squaring-off of the enclosure and the addition of a splendid stone wall, part of the Trinity House work around 1820, largely obliterated the original bank-and-ditch. Apart from the central **cella** and the medieval chapel foundations, no other significant features could be spotted. Continued look-out for further inscribed stones — in the walls, in the neighbourhood, even built into the Old Light and its ground level annexe — is essential; there is no reason to conclude that the four known memorials constitute some fixed total. But, in the wider scenario of early Christianity in the Severn Sea, the period from the late 5th to the mid-7th century was the most important here. After that, it may be doubted whether Beacon Hill continued to be a Christian focus of any kind, until the post-Norman era.

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