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# Columba at Keil Point: Uncovering the Myth

Alex Alexander and Allan Stroud

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Until recently, it has been taken on faith that Columba, the sixth-century Irish monk, landed at Keil Point, Kintyre, in Argyll in 563AD on his way to Iona. Truth or otherwise, historians have perpetuated this myth, which was later championed by the tourism industry. This article will investigate the archaeological remains at Keil Point that have been used to support the claim that Columba was once there, and attempt to uncover the truth behind this claim. It will be argued that there is no archaeological evidence or written historical record in support of the myth. It will also be argued that the domination of the Columba myth is effectively suppressing other aspects of Scottish history. This investigation demonstrates how accepted history can be challenged by archaeological evidence.

Myths, say anthropologists, are folktales believed to be true and regarded as sacred.<sup>1</sup> Further, Allen and Montell posit that ‘what people believe happened is often as important as what actually happened’.<sup>2</sup> This could be said to be true of Columba, the sixth-century Irish monk regarded today as one of the leading saints in Scottish history.<sup>3</sup> Many tales about his life have been woven into Scottish history, leading us to ask how many of these tales are real. However, myths are more than simple untruths: they convey something of the beliefs and priorities of those who tell them.<sup>4</sup> Myths can also be an expression of cultural identity,<sup>5</sup> and are frequently used to justify political

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<sup>1</sup> K. Flannery & J. Marcus, *The Creation of Inequality: How Our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery and Empire* (Cambridge, 2012), 56.

<sup>2</sup> B. Allen & L. Montell, *From Memory to History: Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research* (Nashville, 1981), 89.

<sup>3</sup> T. O. Clancy, ‘Scottish saints and national identities in the early middle ages’ in A. Thacker & R. Sharpe (eds.), *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West* (Oxford, 2002), 397.

<sup>4</sup> A. Gazin-Schwartz & C. J. Holtorf, *Archaeology and Folklore* (London, 1999), 11.

<sup>5</sup> R. Bultman, ‘New Testament mythology’ in H. W. Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth* translated by R. H. Fuller (New York, 1972), 46.

systems.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it is not enough to say that a certain story from the past is a myth: it is also necessary to say why that myth was created and what its creation reveals about the culture of the time.



Figure 1. Map showing location of area of study (in red) © Digimap 2015.

This article will attempt to deconstruct one particular myth about Columba's life and the processes behind its creation. Teasing out truths from historical documents, particularly hagiographic material, can be very difficult, and so other methods must also be applied. In this case, an archaeological study of the evidence at a Columban site, Keil Point in the Kintyre Peninsula (Figure 1), will be used to challenge the myth that this was where Columba first landed in Scotland in 563AD. This will demonstrate how archaeology can be used as a tool to test aspects of Scottish history. While there is no documentary or archaeological evidence to contest the claim that Columba first landed at Keil in 563AD, it can be demonstrated that the local community has used certain artefacts at Keil to perpetuate a myth about Columba. The use of archaeology,

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<sup>6</sup> R. Graves, 'Introduction' in F. Guirand (ed.), *New Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology*, new Edition (London, 1989), v.

along with historical sources, will demonstrate how this myth was created and why this was part of a wider trend of myth-making in Victorian Scotland.

## COLUM OF THE CHURCH

Columba was born in present-day Donegal, although the year of his birth is not known for certain. The *Annals of Ulster* record that Colum Cille was born in 518,<sup>7</sup> but later states that he sailed to Iona in 563 at the age of 42,<sup>8</sup> which would put the year of his birth as 521. Other sources suggest he was born sometime between 520 and 523.<sup>9</sup> He is named in the *Annals of Ulster* as Colum but referred to in other texts as Crimthann, and it is not known for certain which name he used throughout his life. The name Columba, Latin for ‘dove’, was not used until after his death. As a descendant of Conall — the founder of the powerful Cenél Conaill dynasty — Columba had politically powerful kin in the Uí Néill, a group of families that held power in the northern half of Ireland.<sup>10</sup> After completing his ecclesiastical training, Columba allegedly played a role in the events that led to the Battle of Cul Dreimhne in 560, where the northern Uí Néill defeated the Irish high king. Although some of the stories surrounding Columba’s role in the build-up to the conflict are now regarded as fictitious,<sup>11</sup> it was recorded in the *Annals of Ulster* that the battle was won, thanks in part to the prayers of Colum Cille.<sup>12</sup> Therefore Columba is involved in events at some level, although his full role is still under debate.

In 563, Columba and twelve companions left Ireland for Britain. The reason for the voyage is thought to be either voluntary pilgrimage or forced exile.<sup>13</sup> Columba established his seat on the Hebridean island of Iona, where he also founded his church.<sup>14</sup> The facts of Columba’s life thereafter become contentious and much of what

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<sup>7</sup> W. M. Hennessy, *The Annals of Ulster: a Chronicle of Irish Affairs from A.D. 451 to A.D. 1540* (Dublin, 1871), 41.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>9</sup> B. Lacey, *Colum Cille and the Columban Tradition* (Dublin, 1997), 12; R. Sharpe, ‘Introduction’ in Adomnan, *Life of St Columba* (London, 1995), 9.

<sup>10</sup> J. E. Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland: Scotland to 795* (Edinburgh, 2012), 95.

<sup>11</sup> Lacey, *Colum Cille*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Hennessy, *The Annals of Ulster*, 57.

<sup>13</sup> Lacey, *Colum Cille*, 21 and Sharpe, ‘Introduction’, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Hennessy, *The Annals of Ulster*, 61; I. Fisher, ‘The early Christian period’ in D. Omand (ed.), *The Argyll Book* (Edinburgh, 2004), 72-4.

we assume about his life is based on texts written a century after his death. Folktales about Columba, including his ability to perform miracles, began to circulate around Scotland.<sup>15</sup> This reached all aspects of society, for even King Oswald of Northumberland, in 633, claimed he saw an apparition of St Columba, 'radiant in angelic form, whose lofty height seemed with its head to touch the clouds'.<sup>16</sup> But perhaps the biggest myth about Columba in Scotland was his involvement in converting the Picts to Christianity. In many sources, this has become historical fact: Columba journeyed to the land of the Picts, taking with him the new religion.<sup>17</sup> Adomnan's *Life* recounts the journeys of Columba to Pictland and the miracles he performed in front of the heathen Pictish king.<sup>18</sup> Bede records a similar account in his work *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (731), even naming the Pictish king he converted as Bridius.<sup>19</sup> But is this true? Recent research has suggested it is not. Fraser claims that Columba only visited a subsidiary Pictish kingdom in Atholl,<sup>20</sup> and as attested to by Bede, these southern Picts were already practising the Christian faith in Columba's time.<sup>21</sup>

Written historical evidence alone cannot provide an accurate picture of Columba's life, so additional approaches must be explored. Archaeological evidence is an ideal means of testing the validity of historical evidence. To test and explore every myth about Columba's life would fill volumes of books, so one particular myth has been chosen for presentation as a case study.

## **KEIL: THE AREA AND THE MYTH**

The focus of enquiry is the stretch of coastline between Keil Point and Dunaverty on the southern tip of the Kintyre Peninsula in Argyll and Bute. The hills extend to the shoreline, along which are several caves. A ruined church set within a modern cemetery sits at the headland, adjacent to a holy well; both are heavily overgrown (Figure 2). Columba is said to have landed here when he left Ireland in 563. Only

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<sup>15</sup> A. P. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men: Scotland AD 80 – 1000* (Edinburgh, 1984), 85.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>17</sup> C. MacDonald, *The History of Argyll* (Glasgow, 1950), 27; and G. A. F. Knight, *Archaeological Light on the Early Christianizing of Scotland* (London, 1933), 7.

<sup>18</sup> Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, 96.

<sup>19</sup> Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* translated by L. Sherley-Price (London, 1990), 100.

<sup>20</sup> Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, 105.

<sup>21</sup> Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 99.

twelve miles separate the two pieces of land, and Argyll has a long history of interconnections with Ireland. It may seem logical, therefore, for Keil to be Columba's first stop on Scottish shores, but Adomnan's *Life* makes it clear that fourteen days at sea was not unusual at this time.<sup>22</sup> If Iona were Columba's final destination, then there would have been no need for him to stop first at Keil, although this remains a possibility.

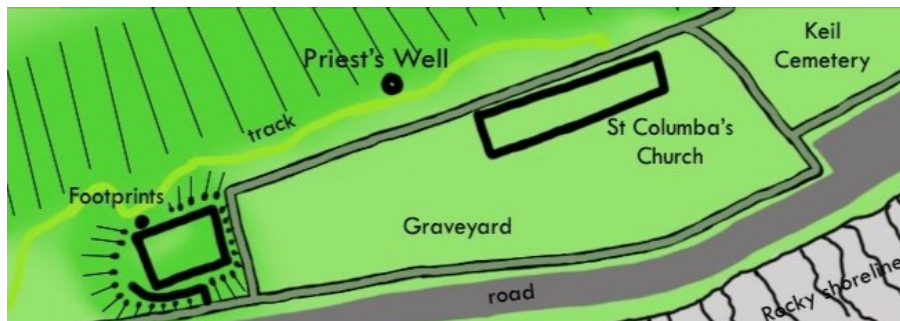


Figure 2. Image of the archaeology at Keil Point, showing the remains of the church and the location of the well and the carved footprints. Authors' own.

This myth is supported by various physical artefacts: two carved stone footprints are said to represent the exact spot he first touched Scottish soil. He and his companions are then said to have sought shelter in Keil Caves and blessed a local well before moving on to Iona.<sup>23</sup> This story has been taken at face value, to the extent that some tour operators include Keil Point as part of Columban pilgrimage routes<sup>24</sup> The archaeological remains of the area are included in this story, with some of the remains integral to it.

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<sup>22</sup> Sharpe, 'Introduction', 197.

<sup>23</sup> Capt. T. P. White, 'The ecclesiastical antiquities of the district of Kintyre in Argyllshire' (1871) 9 *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 227-8.

<sup>24</sup> See for example: 'Campbeltown To Tarbert, Loch Fyne: St Columba Journey' in *Scotlands pilgrim journeys*. Available: <<http://www.scotlandspilgrimjourneys.com/pilgrim-journeys/5/st-columba-journey/?stageid=6>> [Accessed: 10.02.15]; and 'Keil Caves, St Columba's Steps and Dunaverly' in *Walkhighlands*. Available: <<http://www.scotlandspilgrimjourneys.com/pilgrim-journeys/5/st-columba-journey/?stageid=6>> [Accessed: 10.02.15].

## ANALYSING THE ARCHAEOLOGY

Using data from the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), sixteen archaeological sites were identified between Dunaverty Bay and Keil Point. Four of these are associated with the Columba myth: St Columba's Footprints (two carved footprints set into a stone at the entrance to a ruined building), Keil Caves (a number of caves where Columba and his companions are said to have stayed after landing at Keil),<sup>25</sup> St Columba's Church (the ruin of a chapel named after the saint), and St Columba's Well (a natural spring said to have been blessed by Columba).<sup>26</sup>



Figure 3: St Columba's Footprints. Authors' own.

### SITE 1: ST COLUMBA'S FOOTPRINTS

Two carved footprints are named locally as St Columba's Footprints and are advertised as such (Figure 3). Of the two footprints, one is a genuine historical monument, while the second is a much more recent addition. The lower, southernmost of the two footprints (on the right of the photograph) has been identified as a Dark Age inauguration stone, linked to Dunaverty, a nearby fort.<sup>27</sup> This ceremonial artefact was used in the ritual inauguration of a local chief or royal leader who would place his foot

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<sup>25</sup> Capt. T. P. White, 'Ecclesiastical antiquities', 228.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, 156.

in the carved footprint, symbolically linking him with the land.<sup>28</sup> This was a common ritual practice in Ireland and Gaelic Scotland.<sup>29</sup> A more famous example of an inauguration stone can be found at Dunadd Hillfort near Kilmartin in Argyll. There, a foot has been carved into the rock at the summit of the fort.<sup>30</sup> This footprint was used to inaugurate the kings of the early Scottish Kingdom of Dalriada,<sup>31</sup> and employs the same symbolism as the stone footprint at Keil.

However, when drawing parallels between Keil and Dunadd, what immediately becomes apparent is that at Keil there is no royal centre and no great hill fort. This is where the archaeologist's insistence upon looking at sites within the wider landscape is informative. Far east from Keil, across Dunaverty Bay, is an impressive headland: once the location of an early medieval fortress tentatively identified as Aberte. This was the power-base of the powerful *Cenel nGabrain* kingroup.<sup>32</sup> If Dunaverty was an important power-base, then the footprint carved into the rock at Keil would likely have been the location for the ceremonial inauguration of *Cenel nGabrain* leaders. The footprint is directly facing the spot where the fortress would have been, enabling the new leader to view his kingdom as he was being inaugurated.

The second footprint, on the other hand, enjoys no such provenance. It was carved by a local stonemason in 1856,<sup>33</sup> according to a later visitor to the area who heard the story from the perpetrator's grandson.<sup>34</sup> The number 564 that has been carved into the stone beside the footprints was likely carved at the same time. Therefore, neither footprint is associated with Columba and, as such, cannot be used to indicate Columba's presence at Keil.

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<sup>28</sup> M. R. Nieke & H. B. Duncan, 'Dalriada: the establishment and maintenance of an early historic kingdom in northern Britain' in S. Driscoll & M. R. Nieke (eds.), *Power and Politics in Early Medieval Britain and Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1988), 16.

<sup>29</sup> E. Fitzpatrick, *Royal Inauguration of Gaelic Ireland 1100-1600: a Cultural Landscape Study* (Woodbridge, 2004), 125.

<sup>30</sup> Knight, *Archaeological Light*, 259.

<sup>31</sup> Nieke & Duncan, 'Dalriada', 15-16.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-16.

<sup>33</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Royal Inauguration*, 119.

<sup>34</sup> A. MacVicar, 'Irish Heritage' (1987) 21 *The Kintyre Antiquarian and Natural History Society Magazine online*. Available: <<http://www.ralstongenealogy.com/number21kintmag.htm>> [Accessed 04.02.2015].



## SITE 2: KEIL CAVES



Figure 4. Largest of the caves at Keil Point. Authors' own.

The largest of the nine caves was excavated between 1933 and 1935 (Figure 4), uncovering artefacts dating from as early as the third-century AD, when the cave is thought to have first been occupied. Its last occupation was recorded in the 1881 Census, when the cave was home to a tinsmith, his wife, and child, as well as his cousin, a basket-maker, and his wife.<sup>35</sup> Another cave is thought to have contained a Druid's altar stone with cup marks, and was also believed to have been occupied from the third-century.<sup>36</sup> The evidence from the excavations gives no indication of any link with Columba or any other Christian figure. However, another legend attached to the site is that St Kieran of Clonmacnois, a contemporary of Columba who came to Kintyre from Ireland, was thought to have lived in the area as a hermit.<sup>37</sup> It is possible that St Kieran became associated with Columba and began to embellish the story of the latter's arrival in 563.

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<sup>35</sup> C. Tolan-Smith, *The Caves of Mid Argyll: An Archaeology of Human Use* (Edinburgh, 2001), 5.

<sup>36</sup> Ruth Morris & Frank Morris, *Scottish Healing Wells: Healing, Holy, Wishing and Fairy Wells of the Mainland of Scotland* (Sandy, 1982), 34.

<sup>37</sup> Capt. T. P. White, *Archaeological Sketches in Scotland: District of Kintyre* (Edinburgh, 1873), 40.

### SITE 3: ST COLUMBA'S CHURCH

The ruinous and roofless remains of the former parish church measure 22 metres long by 5.6-5.8 metres wide (Figure 4). The dedication of the building to St Columba would seem to provide an obvious link to the monk's presence at Keil. Indeed, the dedication of a site to a particular person was once seen as evidence that that person had been there.<sup>38</sup> However, there is no evidence to support this theory and no records to show how the church received its dedication, which is a common problem in Argyll for sites named after saints.<sup>39</sup>



Figure 5. St Columba's Church (covered in ivy top left) and graveyard. Authors' own.

The eastern portion of the building is the oldest and dates roughly to the thirteenth-century. The western portion of the building was probably added in the late medieval period. Moreover, the church first appears in written records only in the early 1300s, when it was granted to the priory of Whithorn and remained in use until the late 1600s.<sup>40</sup> The church was therefore established far too late to have had any contemporary association with Columba, so the fact that the church bears the name of

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<sup>38</sup> R. Butter, *Cill-names and Saints in Argyll: a Way Towards Understanding the Early Church in Dal Riata?* (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2007), 13.

<sup>39</sup> A. MacDonald, 'Gaelic *Cill* (*Kil(l)*-) in Scottish place names' (1979) 2 *Bulletin of the Ulster Place Name Society* 15.

<sup>40</sup> RCAHMS, *Argyll: An Inventory of the Ancient Monuments*, Vol.1 (Edinburgh, 1971), 147-51.

Columba cannot be taken as evidence that Columba was at Keil.

#### SITE 4: ST COLUMBA'S WELL

Just north of the ruined church is St Columba's Well. This is a natural spring which bubbles from the rocky hillside, with the water collecting in a stone-lined pool (Figure 6). On the rock face that overhangs the well is an incised Latin cross measuring 20 centimetres by 15 centimetres. This is by far the most ambiguous of the sites, as there is no written history and there are no features that can be accurately dated. The cross could have been carved at any time; there is simply no way of knowing. Old maps of the area do not associate Columba's name with the well. The earliest Ordnance Survey map to include Keil, published in 1866, records it as 'Priest's Well,' whilst in later maps the well is marked simply as 'Well.' Yet again, there is no archaeological evidence, except its recent renaming, to link this feature with Columba.



Figure 6. St Columba's Well. Authors' own.

In summary, these four sites are neither connected nor contemporary with one another. Detailed analysis of the archaeology provides no evidence to support the claim that Columba was ever at Keil, although there is evidence that people attempted to associate Columba with the area, through the naming of the Church and the later carving of the second footprint. The evidence, therefore, points away from Columba's historical presence and in favour of deliberate myth-making.

## CONSTRUCTING A MYTH

A close examination of the archaeological evidence, allied with existing documentary evidence, demonstrates that there is nothing to suggest Columba was ever at Keil. The evidence does not absolutely exclude this possibility but strongly suggests that Columba's landing at Keil in 563 is a locally constructed myth. The parties and reasons behind this myth then become interesting in their own right.

One possible explanation is that the area around Keil became involved in the politicisation of Columba long after his death. The cult of St Columba was well established by the time Adomnán wrote on Columba's life in the 680s,<sup>41</sup> and Keil likely became associated with Columba due to the strength of the cult in the local area in the later medieval period. The strength of the cult can partly be ascribed to the deliberate promotion and exaggeration of the life and deeds of Columba by the Scottish kingdom, in what amounted to an early form of state propaganda.<sup>42</sup> In the medieval period, numerous histories were endorsed in order to provide Scotland with a form of provenance, so as to assert it as a modern, centralised, and independent kingdom.<sup>43</sup> Part of this effort involved the promotion of specific saints to establish the uniqueness of Scotland's Christian identity and past, particularly as being independent from England.<sup>44</sup> Columba was one of the saints chosen, and he was subsequently featured prominently in one of the first official histories of Scotland, the *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, compiled in the late thirteenth-century.<sup>45</sup>

Columba was therefore politically endorsed on a national level. Yet this was also likely to have had local impact, particularly amongst followers of the cult of Columba. The lack of historical evidence for the myth could imply that it survived as an oral folktale

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<sup>41</sup> Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men*, 85.

<sup>42</sup> A. Lane, 'Citadel of the first Scots' (2001) 62 *British Archaeology*. Available: <<http://www.archaeology.uk.org/ba/ba62/feat1.shtml>> [Accessed 05.02.2015].

<sup>43</sup> A. Grant, 'The Middle Ages: the defence of independence' in R. Mitchison (ed.), *Why Scottish History Matters* (Edinburgh, 1991), 29.

<sup>44</sup> T. Turpie, *Scottish Saints, Cults and Pilgrimage from the Black Death to the Reformation, c.1349-1560* (PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2011), 26.

<sup>45</sup> D. Broun, *Scottish Independence and the Idea of Britain from the Picts to Alexander III* (Edinburgh, 2007), 261-2.

and, like many written accounts, could have its own political agenda.<sup>46</sup> While it was once thought that place-names showed where a saint had physically been, it was subsequently believed that an area with many sites named after a particular saint actually reflected the strength of that saint's cult in later times.<sup>47</sup> If this is indeed the case, then the popularity of Columba in Kintyre in the later medieval period may explain why the church at Keil was named after him. Even so, this does not explain why the archaeology of the area was deliberately manipulated to imply a connection with Columba. This was a separate development unrelated to medieval politics and occurred much later, during the Victorian era.

As previously mentioned, the northern footprint was carved by a local stonemason in 1856. One implication is that this enterprising local was making alterations to the archaeology at Keil, in order to link it with the Columba myth. At the time, the site would not have been known as an inauguration site for early kings. It would have made sense to repackage the site as a whole, representing just one narrative, including the footprints alongside the caves and the church. The inclusion of the well, renamed as 'St Columba's Well' in the nineteenth-century, would have further strengthened the myth and completed Keil Point's rebranding. The cross may have been added to the well at the same time as it was renamed but, as there is no evidence as to its dating, the provenance of the cross remains a mystery. Therefore, there is a strong argument that at some point during the nineteenth-century, the loose assemblage of archaeological sites at Keil Point were brought together under a single 'Columban' umbrella, with alterations made to some of the archaeology to better place the site within the Columba myth. It is likely that someone in the local community was attempting to create a tourist attraction to market to the Victorian public. This practice was not uncommon: the development of railways and the MacBrayne steamship company opened up Scotland's rural communities to urban-dwelling Victorians,<sup>48</sup> providing many remote rural communities with lucrative new opportunities. The archaeological record contains other instances of locals selling a myth to tourists in the Victorian era, such as Hebridean 'Barvas Ware'.

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<sup>46</sup> R. Layton, 'Folklore and world view' in A. Gazin-Schwartz & C. J. Holtorf (eds.), *Archaeology and Folklore* (London, 1999), 28.

<sup>47</sup> Butter, *Cill-names and Saints*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> H. Cheape, 'Food and liquid containers in the Hebrides: a window on the Iron Age' in A. Fenton (ed.), *Food and Drink and Travelling Accessories: Essays in Honour of Gösta Berg* (Edinburgh, 1988), 7-10.

Like Keil Point, the Hebridean Islands became more accessible after 1851, facilitating the development of tourism in the area. The Victorian middle-class tourists viewed the Hebridean people as primitive, speaking a different language (Gaelic) and living a life far removed from their own. Folklore and anthropology were emerging disciplines at the time and, alongside archaeologists, scholars were attracted to the islands. ‘Crogan Ware,’ a low-fired and hand-thrown pottery, was of particular interest to archaeologists, as this prehistoric-type ceramic was still being made and used even although potter’s wheels were common.<sup>49</sup> Tourism inspired new commodities, including ceramics and glassware, and new shops were opened to sell imported goods. Seeing an opportunity to make money, an enterprising, ‘backward’ group of locals from Barvas on the Isle of Lewis decided to make and sell ceramics that imitated the modern nineteenth-century style to tourists. These ceramics, known as ‘Barvas Ware’ (Figure 7), were in the shape of contemporary tea sets and included teapots, cups, and saucers. ‘Barvas Ware’ was never used by the locals, who favoured modern pottery and their own ‘Crogan Ware’ vessels, but was of interest to tourists and collectors. These handmade clay teapots were created entirely to perpetuate the myth of the Barvas’ ‘primitive’ lifestyle; they were never designed to be functional.<sup>50</sup> They did not reflect the reality of how people lived on the islands but represented what visitors wanted to see. Visitors were attracted to the myth of people still living in the past, with their quaint customs and artefacts.



Figure 7. Example of Barvas Ware. Courtesy of the Hunterian Museum.

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-12.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

To draw a parallel between Hebridean 'Barvas Ware' and the Columban site at Keil, in both instances, locals constructed a myth about the local area in order to increase its appeal to tourists. Victorians liked quaint and romanticised portrayals of the past, and these myths were tailored to suit that market. One distinction is that in Barvas, locals made use of material culture, as opposed to the physical sites used at Keil. Additionally, 'Barvas Ware' is a deliberately constructed myth that fed Victorian fantasy, while the artefacts at Keil are far more subtle. This subtlety, combined with a well-known historical figure, made the myth of Columba at Keil believable. It gave a new and powerful meaning to the archaeology of the site, and it is this meaning, rather than historical accuracy, that grabs the imagination and perpetuates a story.<sup>51</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Whatever his true achievements were in life, Columba became a political and cultural construct after his death, with many people seeking to benefit from his posthumously enhanced reputation. This was partly political, as a more mythical Columba was useful to the leaders of medieval Scotland. The effect at a local level was that it empowered the cult of Columba in some rural areas. This power was reflected in names and dedications, such as the church at Keil. Columba later became something of a cultural construct, both in how his life was presented by locals and accepted by outsiders. This is evident in the legend of Columba's landing at Keil, which was deliberately exaggerated by locals with unsubstantiated (and partially fabricated) evidence, but nevertheless eagerly consumed by the Victorian tourists who visited the site. Their shared belief in this story created a myth that may not reflect the truth about Columba's life.

This investigation has in part been very illuminating of the politics of medieval Scotland, the aspects of the lives of ordinary people at Keil at various points in time, and the entrepreneurial spirit of the Victorian era. But the Columba myth at Keil is also greatly damaging. This area is home to an important and historic royal site where local chiefs were inaugurated into power, but the dominance of the Columba myth is arguably overshadowing other histories which deserve to be known. This is illustrated perfectly by the two footprints that are still called 'Columba's Footprints'. Furthermore, this case study also demonstrates the key role that archaeology plays in questioning any accepted history, whether at Keil or elsewhere. It is important that

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<sup>51</sup> P. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Oxford, 1988), 113.

questions are asked and histories challenged, as this enables a more critical engagement of Columba's life and the stories that surround him.



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