

The Culdees



**An ancient religious
enigma in Scotland.**



**Jackie Queally
Celtic Trails Scotland**

Special thanks to the following good folk;

Alistair Potter, book designer and editor.

Ian Dinwiddie, fellow photographer.

Cover Image: This twelve-petalled flower can be seen at Abercorn, site of Bishop Trumwin's Church in the Dark Ages. The number twelve had great significance for the Culdees. Note the presence of a chalice below and to the left of the cross.

Copyright notice.

Photographs were taken by Ian Dinwiddie, Jackie Queally, and Wallace Smith. Copyright is retained by the photographers and the images may not be reproduced without the owners permission. All text contained in this publication is copyright Jackie Queally and may not be reproduced without the author's permission.

© 2000 Celtic Trails Scotland.

Contents:	Page
The Culdees. Thoughts on who they were and their origins.	4
The Druids. How the Culdees bridged the Druidic and Christian philosophies.	9
Early Eastern Churches. Exploring links with the Copts and earlier gnostic knowledge.	11
The Eastern Connection. How ancient links with Israel were re-established during the Crusades, after the demise of the Culdees.	13
Torphichen. Recognised since earliest times as a place of tremendous power. It lies close to Cairnpapple, 'Scotland's Stonehenge'.	14
The Templars. A movement that continued the strain of old Culdean and gnostic knowledge.	16
The Auld Alliance revisited. Exploring the similarities between the Culdees and French religious movements in the early centuries AD.	16
Late survival of Pictish Culdees. From Pictish kings to Saxon rulers in Scotland 400 - 1100 AD	17
Case Study on Saint Servanus/Serf 470 - 550 The Places and legends associated with this Culdee saint of enigmatic origin.	24
St Kentigern. St. Serf's successor and mighty missionary.	29

The Culdees.

The Culdees were an enigmatic group of early Christians in Scotland whose roots more than likely went back as far as the first century AD. Many a remote and derelict chapel in Scotland has been attributed to the Culdees. To some extent they were distinct from the Celtic Church of Iona, and they survived into the tenth century, and even beyond, in parts where their practices were tolerated within the wider framework of the new Roman Church.

The holy men and women of the Culdean movement emphasised a direct gnosis of God, not qualified by an intermediary theological hierarchy. Rather like the Essenes, who lived in Jesus' times, their contemplative life combined with a 'right way' of being in the world. One of their chief occupations seemed to have been healing, with the use of herbs they cultivated. Toward the end of their lives some members curbed their secular activities and lived in makeshift monasteries that were either caves, or beehive cells constructed from large stones.

A large and very fine example of a beehive cell can be found on Inchcolm Island in the Firth of Forth.

Earlier types of cell were cruder built, and examples can be found among the tangled scrub below some natural crags in West Lothian. These,



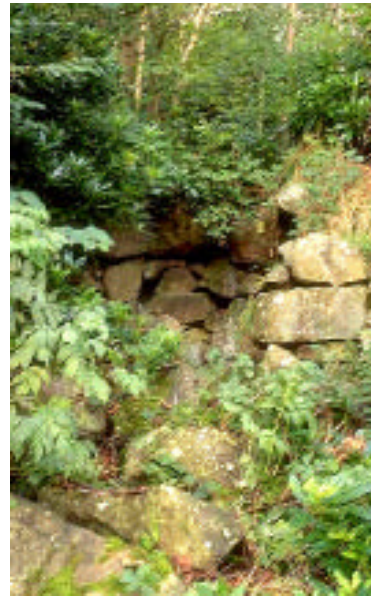
*Beehive Cell, Inchcolm Island,
Firth of Forth.*

sadly, are in ruins.

The cell shown here is believed to have been the chief abode of St Vigeon. He was once seen as the patron saint of Scottish parish churches.

Perhaps all members made regular retreats to such cells in order to keep a balanced outlook on life.

The Culdee movement embraced the concepts of marriage and private land ownership, so their settlements were egalitarian as well as spiritual in outlook.



Ruined beehive cell near Torphichen village, West Lothian.

In marked contrast, the Iona Church in Scotland (founded in the sixth century) stipulated communal ownership of land, celibacy, and larger monasteries.

A Culdee settlement consisted of twelve monks, modelled on the twelve original disciples and paying heed to a wider cosmic symbolism of the number twelve. They had a tradition of gathering in groups of twelve and then subdividing if it grew beyond that number. This practice lasted well into the thirteenth century in the area the southern Picts used to inhabit.

It seems that the spiritual role of the Culdees was to provide a continuum from the old Druidic practices that revolved round their belief in the resurrection and the evolving soul, and their perception of Jesus as their arch-Druid. In the late pre-Christian era, there was a "Yesu" cult within Druid circles, common to the Hebrew belief in "Yeshu". (Refer to material of Johannine Grove

Ministry, Church of Antioch, Crestone, Colorado for an interesting account of Druid thought in Scotland in the immediate pre-Christian era). Certain Druid groups in Scotland had long anticipated the coming of Christ in human form on the earth. Druids prepared inwardly at specific sacred earth sites in order that the Christ consciousness could impact on humanity at large. They would have been ready to receive any emissaries from the land in which the Christ was incarnated

Joseph of Arimathea and a holy group of men and women from Palestine are known to have come to Britain on more than one occasion during Jesus' lifetime. (This group is widely believed now to have been part of Jesus' extended family that interbred with the Celts in Scotland. This would have provided one of the seeds for what became known as the "Grail Line".)

The Arimathean group visited certain Druid sites for interchange of ideas, and then, in the decades that closely followed the Crucifixion, the Culdees may have settled close to these old sites of significance, in order to ground the new Christian message of love and purity of heart intent.

The historian Lewis Spence claims that the Culdees were the direct descendants of the Druidic caste. Another theory is that they originally travelled from the Middle East, as the ruling authorities threatened their way of life at that time. The Arimathean mission would have paved a way for the arrival of these strangers. The first Culdees were in effect of the order of Essenes, who had adapted their philosophy to the native religion of Scotland.

Why would they have chosen Scotland as their new homeland? Possibly because the land is ancient,

and the priests and priestesses were renowned throughout Europe and beyond for their wisdom. Powerful points existed then as now on the land, where the spiritual energies of initiates could be raised and developed within the framework of older spiritual practices. We shall refer to the significance of Scotland's earth energies throughout this book, as it is a vital clue to the pattern of Culdee settlement, as indeed it is to other movements in Scottish history.

If the original Culdees were a group of immigrant Essenes, they would have been learned Pythagoreans. There is the view expressed that Pythagorus came to ancient seats of learning in the Hebrides for his training in esoteric matters, prior to establishing his own school of training in Greece (see *Jesus the Master Builder* by Gordon Strachan for one such view). Pythagorus' teachings spread into Palestine and other lands before returning to Britain via the Essenes, who would have reinforced the ancient Hibernian knowledge of the secrets of numbers.

The Culdees seemed to settle close to old sacred sites, many of which were placed over energetic earth sites. Recent independent study, on a global scale, has revealed a grid pattern over the earth's surface and shows that holy sites are located on specific nodes generated by the grid. The pattern is determined according to ancient Pythagorean geometrical forms.

It is interesting to note that many of the later medieval pilgrimage routes follow lines made by the grid.

In medieval times noble families or clans of Scotland such as the Sinclairs of Rosslyn Chapel near Edinburgh, or the Stewarts ("custodians of the land"),

were also perceived as being part of the Holy Blood or Grail line, sharing ancestral roots with Jesus' family. These clans often built strongholds or chapels on power points connecting earth energy lines laid down in these grid patterns long, long ago. The positions of these medieval chapels often coincide with the older Culdee sites.

One such example is St Mary's Chapel at Grandtully, in north Perthshire. It belonged to the Stewart family who were involved with the Templars. The ceiling is exquisitely painted with esoteric symbols. Behind the chapel there is a field with an ancient lay of stones, evidently an old site of worship, and linked according to students of esoteric history, with a former Culdee church.

In old Church records the Culdees were recorded as the "Cele Dei" or



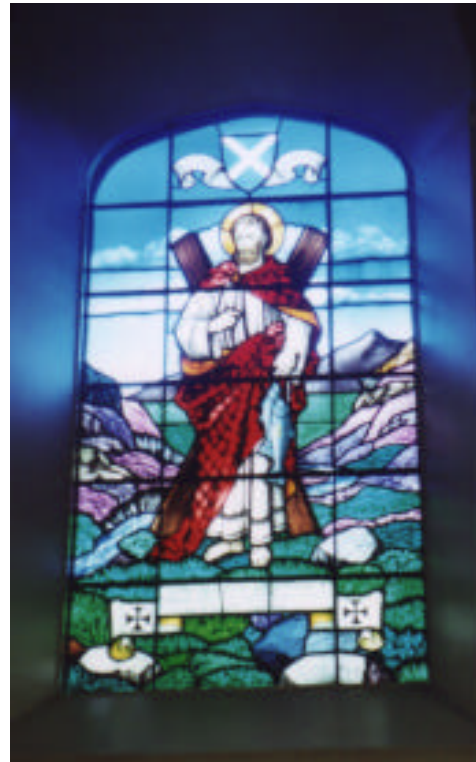
Ceiling detail in St Mary's Chapel, Grandtully, Perthshire.



Early site of worship, behind St Mary's, Grandtully.

"Keledei" meaning "Children of God". Others believe they were known as "culdich", meaning "Strangers from Afar". This would refer to those who came from the Middle East to settle in a new but welcoming environment, where their knowledge would be appreciated. Perhaps these strangers had been directed by hidden superiors within closed circles, who saw their mission to Scotland as important and timely.

Barry Dunford, esoteric historian, sees the Culdees mission as a successful attempt to marry the old Druidic beliefs in Britain with the eastern philosophy of the Essenes. Interestingly, the Culdee monks wore robes of white in the fashion of both Druids and Essenes. The Essenes were forced to go underground, but their knowledge and spiritual intent resurfaced in Britain with the Culdees, much in the same way that the Druids transposed into Christianity.



Stained glass window, Innerwick Church, Glen Lyon, Perthshire. Showing possible Culdee monk in white robe.

The Druids.

In addition to the Middle Eastern gnosis carried by groups like the Essenes, which was echoed in later times

with groups like the Templars, the Culdees embraced the purer strains of Druidism.

If we go back in history, we see that the Culdees frequented the same sites as the Druids, who left us with a rich legacy of standing stones and cairns. The actual sacred alignment of energies at such locations drew men and women who were sensitive to the divine in nature. They used their chosen spots for divine purposes that generally have been lost in time. The Culdees were also deeply appreciative of the laws of nature.

Many of the Culdee sites were dedicated to the Trinity, although sometimes they bore the name of a local saint. Eleanor Merry, in *The Flaming Door*, said that the Celtic mythology was at its greatest during the third astrological epoch, and hence the number three was significant, as exemplified in the Trinity. Celtic Christianity would have felt a keen affinity with the Trinity, and many of their prayers are dedicated to the third element, the Dove or Holy Spirit.

In Europe there were many Saxon kingdoms where they worshipped Odin, the god of the Underworld. In the Scottish Borders there is evidence



Standing Stone close to Druid stone circle at Foulis Wester, Perthshire.



Cairn close to Foulis Wester, Perthshire.

that the Brythonic speaking tribes worshipped Odin (see A. Moffat's *Arthur and the Lost Kingdom*). According to Isobel Elder, the missionary Culdees would have had little problem in converting Odin followers to their new religion. The petty chiefdoms of southern Scotland one by one became Christian, but the saints who lived in those early centuries are little known.

Dryburgh Abbey in Tweeddale was one of many religious sites built along the river Tweed. The site was known in Gaelic as "Banks of the Oak Grove" and is rich in atmosphere. The Druids revered the oak grove as a place of worship. In the seventh century, oral tradition says that an Irish monk lived there, but no remains of his chapel have yet been found. Could this spot of great beauty and peace have been home to a quiet Culdee group?



Site of old altar, Dryburgh Abbey.

Early Eastern Churches.

The Gnostic strain of philosophy that The Culdees embraced should be investigated further.

The Culdees were inspired by Desert Fathers such as the likes of Martin de Tours and Anthony of Pispir. These desert fathers embraced old Gnostic strains of Christianity that were not tied into the Petrine Church of Rome. The Culdees would have known of the gospel of James the Less (James the Minor), the half brother of Jesus and first leader of the Church in Jerusalem after

the crucifixion. The alleged brother of John the Divine, James the Major (James the Great), also figured in the early Coptic and Celtic strains of the Church. When the early Church in Palestine and



Pictish stone and Culdee site at Abdie (Place of God.), Fife.

elsewhere suffered persecution under the Romans, this strain of knowledge appears to have gone underground and was resurrected in the far west, in Britain. This early form of Christianity held sway in Britain wherever there were receptive Druids to welcome it. Eventually St. Paul's strain of Christianity, that allied itself with the Romans, supplanted what was deemed as "gnostic". Scholars, like Isobel Hill Elder, present records of a form of Christianity extant around 37 AD in Britain, long before the nation had declared itself Christian.

It seems that both the Eastern Orthodox Church and this exceedingly early form of Celtic Church honoured the philosophy of St. James' church; the latter was relatively untouched for



The Armenian Cathedral of St James in Jerusalem, showing entrance to the chapel of St James the Major.

centuries after Jesus died. Representing a path of deep knowledge, it was somehow protected and survived the political allegiances of the state rulers. The churches in the extremes of Europe shared a common cosmology that remained untainted, and was closer to the original teaching of Jesus, for centuries.

The Armenian Church, with its adoration of the two James disciples, bears a close resemblance to the early Culdee church. In Jerusalem the relics of both saints are kept, and venerated still, in ancient Armenian chanting of great beauty to witness.

The Eastern Connection.

An earlier eastern connection is as follows. In Barry Dunford's *The Holy Land of Scotland*, we see that in 1612 a summary of the Scottish Chronicles mentions a connection in 187 AD between King Rheuda and the representatives of the court of King Ptolomeus of Egypt. The Egyptians appeared to be advising the king on Scotland's future role. These Eastern visitors divined that there were great riches and profit to be gained within the veins of the earth of Scotland, a land whose rocks were among the oldest formed in the world (older than the Himalayas or the Andes).

Perhaps their message was referring to divine energies inherent in the earth, rather than material riches such as gemstones or precious metals. The royal kings in early times were the spiritual leaders, and Scotland, with its proliferation of Druid advisors from their groves and sacred circles, seems to have borne a special role in the preservation of high knowledge in both the Age of Taurus, Pisces, and now perhaps Aquarius too.

If local Scottish kings were seen as bearing divine

or cosmic truths by hereditary right, it is interesting that in the early years of their existence the Culdees adopted the practice of hereditary knowledge and training in cosmic affairs. The extended family Jesus was born into are likewise said to have borne hereditary sacred knowledge, and it is worth a reminder here that the Culdees were thought to be connected to this family.

We can see a link between Israel and Scotland by reading the Declaration of Arbroath, 1320, which was overseen by Robert the Bruce. There it relates that the Scots came from Greater Scythia, twelve hundred years after the Israelite departure from Egypt, which would make it during the Atlantean period.

Hence the Scotti and the Hebrews were inextricably linked. The Scythian strains certainly fed into the philosophy of Jesus' teachings, as attested by Professor Andrew Wellburn of Oxford University in *The Beginnings of Christianity*.

Other researchers have seen links between the Scythian sources, the early Irish monks who dwelt in their beehive cells, and the Scottish Culdee movement.

Torphichen.

Returning to the ruined beehive cells of Torphichen in West Lothian mentioned near the start, the locals perceive these cells as having been inhabited by Irish monks. The Irish monks would more than likely have trained in the Culdee style under St Ninian, a man of local noble stock, at the Candida Casa in Galloway in the fourth century. This was long before Columba came to the early Christian monastery at Iona in the west. Iona was formerly the site of an important Yew tree cult of Druids. The Columban monks spread their missions

successfully into the whole of the west of Britain and also Ireland, and became inextricably linked with the earlier Culdees who had laid the foundations of Christianity throughout Scotland.

Torphichen later became the headquarters of the Knights Hospitallers. According to Jack Smith, local, and official Knight of St John, they established their



Torphichen. Main preceptory of the Knights Hospitallers, an order founded in 1099.

sanctuary where a major Culdee settlement had once been. (The present-day Knights of St John are an order created by Queen Victoria in recognition of their long service in 'days of yore' in Jerusalem and elsewhere.)

The Knights Hospitallers were the first knightly order of Crusaders. Their work was dedicated to John the Baptist. Fascinatingly, John the Baptist is said to have been a renegade Essene who chose to preach alone in order to fulfil a heartfelt mission (see *The Way of the Essenes - Christ's Hidden Life Remembered* by Anne and Daniel Meurois-Givaudan).

As with the earlier Culdee monks who lived there, herbal gardens and healing waters were an integral part of the knight's work. Torphichen sits in the shadow of Cairnpapple, Scotland's equivalent to Stonehenge. The energy grid lines mentioned before, pass through this healing area.

Templars: Bearers of old Culdean / Gnostic Knowledge.

Just as the Culdees were ousted from their recognised public roles, the Templar mission took over their role; closely commanded by knowledgeable clans like the Sinclairs and the Stewarts (the Sinclairs married into the family of the Templar's founder, Hugh de Payenne, at its inception).

Ballantrodoch, near Temple Village, Midlothian, was the headquarters and early home of Templars in Scotland.



*Ballantrodoch, Temple
village, Midlothian.*

Interestingly, a Masonic historian A. E Waite in his *New Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry* (early 19th century) quotes Godfrey Higgin's *Celtic Druids*, in which Godfrey describes the Culdees as Gnostics. Whilst the Templar tradition took root in Scotland, following their fleeing from France, the Cistercian monasteries laid foundations in many parts of Scotland where once the small Culdee monasteries had stood. These monks led austere lives in much the same way that the Culdees had done before.

The Auld Alliance revisited.

There was an interesting spiritual dynamic between Scotland and France. At the same time as the Culdees entered Britain, they appeared to settle

elsewhere in Europe, founding their strain of Christianity at the same time as the Romans were forging theirs. For instance, in France the Galician church was close in nature to the Culdees.

In the south of France in the 12th century the Cathars threatened the monopoly of the Roman church. The Cathars, like the early knights of Britain, followed the teachings of the Gnostic gospel of John the Divine.

Barry Dunford points out that the words "Cathar" and the "Cathair Culdee" (Chair of Culdees) are similarly spelt.

The Cathars of France suffered terrible persecution due to their Gnostic outlook. By contrast, in Scotland, the Culdean philosophy existed in one form or another up until the Reformation of the Scottish Church in the mid 16th Century. Interestingly, the Reformers argued for a return to simplicity and lack of pomp in religious devotional practices, which seemed to echo the Culdean view. This continuity hints at national or regional traits in spiritual practice. Perhaps it was due to this, and physical isolation, that the Culdees managed to survive for so long in Scotland.

Late survival of Pictish Culdees.

In 597, the same year as Columba died, Augustine built the first Augustine monastery in Canterbury. This order of monks followed the Roman ecclesiastical style. Augustine's influential convert, King Athelred of Kent, had married a Gaulish princess, and this liaison offered Augustine the opportunity to push northwards towards Northumberland. He used his political ties to win over Anglo-Saxon kings to his Roman church, ensuring the church gained inroads into political and legal affairs,

much in the same way that Columba had worked as both statesman and priest in the north. It was a slow and gradual process in which the mainstream Celtic church gave way to the Roman Church of the south.

It was due to the likes of Colman, a monk who had been present at the Synod of Whitby, and who had refused to accept the changes sought by the Roman Church, that the Culdee church was inspired to continue. (Colman had succeeded Trumwine and Cuthbert as Abbot of the Iona-linked Lindisfarne, but he removed himself to an island sanctuary off the west of Ireland). Despite the Synod of Whitby's efforts, the Culdees remained at Lindisfarne (Holy Island) until 1138!



Cemetery at Lindisfarne Abbey.

Now let us take a closer look at the pattern of Culdee settlement in Scotland, with a view to highlighting the chief saints and sites associated with them.

In the eighth and ninth centuries, the Culdee priests came into a more public being, dressed in their white robes and attracting even penitent kings. King Constantine of the Picts retired from office to become Abbot of the Culdee settlement at St. Andrews in the tenth century. This establishment existed for nearly three hundred years until 1124. Abernethy University and Collegiate Church inland survived even longer - until

the end of the 13th century.

In Dull in Perthshire there are the remains of a Pictish Christian college reputed to be Culdee in spirit. Dull seems to have shared a training role with the Abbey on Iona. There were several other Culdee chapels in the area.

The Culdees have been interpreted as a hidden church, and in the Northeast of Scotland, those in power miraculously tolerated them. Their organisation was fairly fluid, unlike the tight rule of Iona. Even the Pictish king Nechtan, who was so clearly opposed to the Irish Celtic Church, turned a blind eye to the Culdees. Unlike the Irish style monks, the Culdees were allowed to retain property if they joined the Church. They

differentiated the Christianity of the Northeast, and were active in the ancient capitals of Abernethy and Dunkeld as well as Brechin in Forfar. (Brechin has a medieval cathedral flanked by an Irish round tower.)

The Picts had ignored the 664 Synod of Whitby, which stipulated that the Celtic Church should adopt a



Dull Church, Perthshire. (Templar)



Ancient site traditionally known as St Ninians, Dull.

new style of tonsure; not wash the feet as part of their church ritual, nor observe any longer the Easter dates as set by the moon tables and the Hebrew Passover. By contrast, the Roman dates for Easter were set according to their Sun calendar.

However, in 706, King Nechtan swore allegiance to the Roman Church, and many of the churches had to sever their titular connections with the old Celtic saints with whom they were associated. Boniface, alias Curitan, was the prominent monk who aided Nechtan in his bid to Romanise the Pictish church. Curitan was a Celtic priest who travelled extensively in true Celtic style. His name lives on in various Gaelic place names and local wells he must have stayed at, and in Glen Urquhart his settlement lay in the shadow of a chambered cairn (Corrimony).

There is also a tradition that St Boniface came to Scotland from Palestine with six other bishops and exorcists, whereupon Nechtan gave him permission to establish churches in the north east. There are records of Nechtan, King of the Picts, asking Coelfrid, Abbot of Jarrow, for help in merging their church with the Roman one.

In keeping with his promise to effectively alienate and prohibit those monks who did not change their loyalties, Nechtan expelled the Church of Iona in 717. He treated the Columban monks likewise at Abernethy, the old capital of south Pictland. Abernethy had been a centre for Christians since 460, when it was dedicated to St. Bride of Kildare. (When Columban monks arrived at Abernethy in 590 they restored the church and rededicated it to Bride. The Pictish king Gartnaidh allowed the first stone church to be built at that time.)

Nectan managed to move the political and religious centre to Scone close by in Perthshire. (After he died Kenneth Mac Alpin, through a fortuitous marital alignment, united the Dalriada and the Picts, and moved the capital to Dunkeld.) Although Nectan officially forbade the Celtic Church to continue, his actions must have been politically rather than spiritually driven, because he did seem to tolerate the Culdees.

Abernethy is recorded as a long and successful seat of the Culdees. It was not until 1272 that the Abernethy Picts were finally forced to break their ties with the Irish Church. The Irish round tower still stands defiant beside the rebuilt Church, marking past associations.



Abernethy Round Tower, Fife.

The unobtrusive manner in which Culdee priests conducted their affairs was better suited to isolated rural communities than the Roman church, which catered for an urban population whose observances of nature and the moon cycles were not so strong as their rural cousins were. The Pictish symbol stones in the area all suggest a particular affinity with the moon, and there may have been other deeply felt implications of the Roman regulations, which strengthened the Pict's resolve to adhere to their old ways.

The struggle for survival culminated in the

eleventh century with the "vision" of Queen Margaret, a Saxon queen who had been raised in the court of Hungary. Her preferred vocation was that of a nun, but her fate was to be wedded to the Scottish King, Malcolm Canmore. She led a life of extreme humility and piety, combined with a determination to establish a Christian kingdom in Scotland that would be acceptable to Rome. Interestingly, Malcolm called for William St Clair to act as royal escort for his bride on the journey from Hungary. William was first cousin to William the Conqueror. He accepted Malcolm's invitation to settle in Scotland, bringing other St Clair knights with him at the start of the feudal system in Scotland.



*Pictish symbol stone
at base of Irish round
tower, Abernethy.*

William "the Seemly", as Malcolm knew him, allegedly carried part of the holy cross, or rood, back from the Holy City of Jerusalem, and hence the name Holyrood Palace and Park in Edinburgh. Later generations of the St Clairs built the magnificent Rosslyn Chapel, steeped in Knights Templar, gnostic, and other esoteric symbols. (The chapel lies just to the south of Edinburgh in a beautiful wooded glen). It seems that both Malcolm and Margaret were instrumental in reviving original seeds of Christianity, allowing them to shoot off in new and sometimes unexpected directions.

Margaret called for a celibate priesthood, and an extension of Benedictine rule, among other things. She exuded practicality, and established a ferry link between

the south and north shores of the Firth of Forth, so that pilgrims could have easier access to St. Andrews and Inchcolm Abbey.

She saw to it that Iona became part of the Roman Church's network of pilgrimage centres by restoring the abbey there. It had been desecrated by the Vikings in their earlier sea raids.

Miraculously, the chapel dedicated to St Oran had been left fairly intact during their invasion. Oran was a saint who had lived on Iona prior to Columba's arrival. He may have been a Culdee monk.

M a r g a r e t achieved many of her declared intentions. The Iona community became part of the Roman Church, as indeed did the Celtic Church of Scotland as a whole.

There did seem to be subtle differences between the Culdees and the Iona Church. These differences may have tipped the balance between toleration and rejection. Margaret tolerated the Culdees in places like St Andrews and Loch Leven, and made regular pilgrimages



*Inchcolm Abbey, Firth of Forth.
Known as the 'Iona of the East'.*



*Iona Abbey, Isle of Iona ,
West Coast of Scotland.*

to Culdee spots such as these.

In 842 circa, the last Pictish king was Brude, son of Deregard, who gave Loch Leven to God and St Serf and the hermits living there. (This was not the same Serf as the earlier Culdee saint who is studied a little further on.) In 1150 the island where these hermits lived was given over to St Andrews. The Charter of David, 1084 - 1153, stated that the Culdees on the island had to live according to the rule of the Roman Canons of St. Andrew, or face eviction. However, the Culdees remained in one corner of the church at St. Andrews, performing services in their own manner until long after King David died. Perhaps he too turned a blind eye to their activities, and officially took another line to appease the Roman Church.

**Case Study on Saint Servanus/Serf 470 - 550.
(Feast Day 20th April)**

The apparent origins of this enigmatic saint would suggest that there were ongoing links with the Middle East in the early centuries AD.

The earliest mention of St Serf says he was borne of Alma, a Pictish princess, and Proc, king of Canaan (according to Oengus, a Culdee in the 9th century). An unknown 13th century writer maintains that St Serf's father was Obeth, King of Canaan, and his mother was Alphaia, daughter of the King of Arabia. He studied in Alexandria where he would perhaps have learnt of the Gnostic writings banned by the Roman church.

There is an oral tradition that Serf was guided by an angel to come to Scotland. There he met Adomnan of Iona on Inchkeith Island in the Firth of Forth. The abbot of Iona allocated him the Ochill Hills as his 'patch' for

missionary duties. However, Adomnan died in 704, aged 80 - so this tale may refer to another saint by name of Servanus, who also came from the east!

Pelagius the Heretic. - Pelagius was a British monk whose popularity was at its peak in 380 AD when many of Jerome's own students in Rome followed his teachings. The doctrine was bold in that it claimed there was no such thing as original sin, and that man was free to choose a life of piety without sole dependence on divine grace. The "heresy" was never entirely stamped out, and doctrinal strains of it remain within the British character at large today. Elder maintains that Pelagius was actually a certain Morien, 20th Abbot of Bangor-on-Dee, Wales, who attempted to revive Druidism in its original forms of nature worship, and the belief in Man's free will. Perhaps by adopting the Pellagian pseudonym he was never discovered, and Britain never charged of heresy by Rome. Bede was a fairly accurate biographer based at Jarrow in the early eighth century. He identified Palladius as a Caledonian sent by Rome in 421 to stamp out the Pellagian cult in Ireland. For political safety, Bede adds, the Pellagians converted to the Roman church, though this is inaccurate recording of the facts. Interestingly Bede also records Palladius as being a Culdee! The reason for this becomes clear in the following text.

Palladius. - Serf's mission was, according to the Aberdeen Breviary of 1510, already established by the time that Palladius travelled to Britain from the Church of Rome. He came with Germanus to quell the heretical interest in Pelagius. When Palladius travelled to the land of the southern Picts, he met Serf of Culross (pronounced "coo-ross") in Fife, whose prime reason for

fame lay in his role as surrogate parent of the better known Saint Kentigern. Serf or Servan was a most enlightened Culdee by all accounts. He surely influenced Palladius, for ironically, Palladius was later deemed a heretic himself for his active participation in Gnosticism.



*Impression in rock traditionally known as "Palladius' footprint" ,
Glen Lyon, Perthshire.*

Serf's name was 'Sair' in the local language, and he is connected with the regions of Fife, Perthshire, Strathclyde, south of the Forth and Aberdeenshire, where he met the missionary Drostan.

Serf crossed over from Kinrieth, south of the river Forth, and archaeological remains show an early church there too

The people of the Ochill Hills in Fife are said to have worshipped Mananan, the Celtic god of the sea.

Saint Serf supposedly used his "persuasive" power to stop this practice. Churches in his name are scattered through these hills. The little village of Culross on the north side of the Forth celebrated his festival until 1839, by bearing green boughs in procession through



*Tuilyres Stone, part of
ruined circle overlooking
the Firth of Forth at
Torryburn.*

the streets. It is said that he had preached at a stone circle which belonged to the Druids of Culross, which eventually became a very early “Culdee” (hidden) church or monastery.

He built a school for training boys to enter the Church, and he introduced the art of calligraphy, which became firmly established as a local tradition well into the 16th century.

This monastic tradition then converted into the Cistercian abbey at Culross, built by King Malcolm in the thirteenth century. Serf's body was allegedly buried in Culross. Ruins of a church there have been detected at the south external side.

Given that Serf taught many monks the art of calligraphy, it is likely that there was a need for an over-spill church, and the Old West Kirk above the Culross site is full of interesting early stones and earlier foundations which suggest this.

Serf is also associated with Dunning, a little further north. There he met and single-handedly fought off a dragon that had been terrorising the locals. It emerged from the hillside close to where



*Ruins of Cistercian
monastery, Culross, Fife.*



The Old West Kirk, Culross, Fife.

his church was built. There are ancient cairns in the vicinity of this hill.

Over in south Tayside, the peaceful old church site in the hamlet of Creich lies close to an Iron Age fort and Pictish hut circles.

St Serf is said to have been here also, and the site is known locally as an old Culdee settlement. It is quite close to the old Cistercian monastery of Lindores Abbey.

There seems to be a pattern of Cistercian and other medieval monasteries following on from Culdee sites, possibly establishing themselves on sites of high feminine (receptive/contemplative/strong and Devic) energies. Again, they are often placed over energetic nodal points in terms of earth energies, which would make them good healing spots.

Serf was depicted as gentle and humble and very gifted with animals. Many miracle stories have been attributed to him.

E.g. "A poor man had killed his only pig to provide a meal for the saint on a visit. Serf found out and restored the pig." (*St Serf* by R.L. Hunter).

He fought with the devil in his cave retreat at



Old Church at Creich, North Fife.



Ruins of Lindores Abbey, Fife.

Dysart on the Fife coast. St Serf's Cave lay in the grounds of the Carmelite monastery at Dysart, and was used by the Earls of Roslin for many years as a wine cellar. (The wine must have been very inspiring!)

One wonders whether Serf was in fact an arch-Druid who defected to the church in order to legitimise old magical practices. (Druids did still co-exist with Christian believers in this period). Serf died in Dunning, his earliest church.

His favourite pupil at Culross, Kentigern, could not have been better placed for the life of legend he led in turn. In 1217 Malcolm, Earl of Fife, founded a Cistercian Abbey at the same spot where the early Celtic monastic school lay, and St Serf's relics were worshipped there until 1530. (It is possible that Longannet Point, two and half miles west of Culross, held his relics, as it means "the church that contains the relics of the founder"). By 1560 the effects of the Reformation marked the demise of Culross.

St Kentigern.

Serf's successor Kentigern was also firmly rooted in the Culdee tradition, though he broke with the old style of inheriting the title of abbot through bloodline. This only occurred in the early days when the Culdees emulated the Druids hereditary system for choosing spiritual practitioners. Kentigern's lineage was most impressive in itself: his grandfathers were King Loth, and King Rhegged a mighty Cumbrian warlord.

Serf knew Kentigern as "My Beloved One" or, in Brythonic, "Mungo". Mungo founded the city of Glasgow on one of his early missions, and this city's coat of arms testifies to this day the many miracle stories that have survived the saint's life.

Kentigern met the Scottish Merlin in the Border Hills. The early parish church at Stobo commemorates their meeting in a stained glass window showing Kentigern ‘baptising’ Merlin. This window sits over an old standing stone, which has been incorporated into the wall.



Kentigern and Merlin.

This aisle of the church, which is dedicated to St Kentigern, is built over an ancient Culdee site. In turn the location of the church was formerly a place of Druid worship. Inside, another window depicts a burning fire with the timeless reminder that:

"Behold. You are standing on hallowed ground."

There can be little doubt that the early Celtic Church in Scotland was



Exterior of Stobo Kirk, Tweeddale, showing a standing stone built into the wall beneath the window.

positively influenced by the Culdee monks who understood the workings of the invisible worlds. Their meditative, healing and loving presence never really left the land, and lies awaiting our recognition still today.

Bibliography.

Torphicen, Jack Smith, OSJ 1997

Temple Doors '97, Johannine Grove Ministry, Church of Antioch, Crestone, Colorado 81131

Jesus the Master Builder, Gordon Strachan, Floris Books 1998

The Holy Land of Scotland, Barry Dunford, Brigadoon Books 1996

The Flaming Door - The Mission of the Celtic Folk Soul Eleanor C. Merry, Floris Books 1962 (1st printed 1936 by Rider & Co.)

Arthur and the Lost Kingdom. A. Moffat, Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1999

Celt, Druid and Culdee, Isobel Hill Elder, The Covenant Publishing Co. 1938

The Beginnings of Christianity, Professor Andrew Wellburn, Floris Press 1995

The Way of the Essenes, Christ's Hidden Life Remembered, Anne and Daniel Meurois -Givaudan, Destiny Books 1993

New Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry, A.E. Waite, early 1800s

Abernethy Round Tower, John Blackburn, Buick Scottish Heritage Series No. 1 1996

St Serf - Apostle of the Lands from the Ochills to the Sea, R.L. Hunter FSA, FSA Scot

History of Paganism in Caledonia, Thomas A. Wise, 1884

Scotland's Symbol Stones, Edward Peterson PCD, Ruthven Books 1996

The Beloved (St Mungo), Reginald Hale, University of Ottawa Press 1989

St Mungo, edited by Iain McDonald, Floris 1993

Celtic Trails Scotland offers a weekly programme of six **guided tours** - each visiting unique locations in the local coast and countryside. All are within one hour's drive of Scotland's beautiful capital city Edinburgh. In addition we offer **slide shows** on Scottish trees and sites, and **residential courses** on ancient sites and earth energies.

For further information contact;

**Jackie Queally
Celtic Trails Scotland
299B Gilmerton Road
Edinburgh
EH16 5UJ**

Phone/Fax: (44) 0131 6641980

Phone: (44) 0131 672 3888

Mobile: 07879 838 401

E-mail: jac@celtictrails.co.uk

Website: www.celtictrails.co.uk

Published by Caterpillar Press.
caterpillar@cablenet.co.uk

