

A Voyage in Search of Hinba

Hinba and the Isle of Seil



A Voyage in Search of Hinba

Robert J. Rae, Isle of Seil

The location of Hinba, the favourite Island of St Columba, described in Adomnán's Life of Columba (Reeves, 1874, Anderson and Anderson 1961) remains a topic of debate. Eileach an Naoimh, Oronsay, Jura and more recently Canna have each been considered. Each has its advocates. One island which has strong associations with Brendan of Clonfert and is located on the ancient sea route from Ireland to Ardnamurchan and Skye, has been overlooked. The evidence of Adomnán is re-examined along with geography and the significance of names. A worthy new candidate has been found. Perhaps the Island of Hinba has at last been located.

A Maritime perspective: The Kingdom of Dalriada stretched from the Antrim coast along the western seaboard of Scotland including the inner Hebrides as far north as The Isle of Skye. The expansion of Dalriada went hand in hand with the founding of Christian communities where teaching, practical help, food production, and copying the Latin Bible were woven into a pattern of work and worship.

Perhaps the first centre was established by Brendan of Clonfert, better known as the Navigator. He established a church at Port Mohr on what is now called the Isle of Seil. Later, Columba and others established a number of settlements the best known of which is Iona. These men were sailors. Cormac led a missionary voyage to Orkney and Brendan may well have sailed as far as America. A look at the tidal patterns reveals the logical sea routes for travel in those days.

The east-flowing tide along the Antrim coast significantly reduces the time taken to reach the Sound of Jura. When a sailing or rowing vessel leaves Portrush in Antrim at the optimum time of tide it will catch the north flowing tide in the Sound of Jura allowing the northern capital of Dunad to be reached in about 8 hours. This works in both directions and can be verified by sailing from Crinan to Portrush or the reverse. From the Sound of Jura a well-sheltered sea route continues north by the Seil Sound, Clachan Sound, Sound of Kerrera and Sound of Mull to the north of Ardnamurchan. This was the ancient trade route from Ireland to Mull, the small isles and Skye, which was determined by potentially favourable tides and good shelter from west and east winds. This combination allowed

small craft to make progress even in gale force winds. Vessels heading west towards the Ross of Mull, Iona or Tiree could choose the Sound of Islay if the tide was favourable, the Sound of Luing or Cuan Sound. For the bold, in a hurry when wind and tide were favourable, a short cut could be taken through the Gulf of Corryvreckan.



A curragh arrives at Seil en route from Ireland to Iona. May 2009.

The vessel suitable for this passage would be a Curragh, but not a coracle as so often reported. The coracle is the equivalent of a rubber dinghy suitable for use in sheltered rivers and loch for setting nets or crossing rivers. A coracle can be carried on a man's

back and holds no more than two people. A curragh with a wooden frame about 25 to 30 ft long, sails and oars for 12 people, was a seaworthy vessel. Tim Severin (1978) had such a vessel built with traditional materials and sailed it to America.

It is possible that a galley or curragh might have carried coracles for landing on beaches in a swell. This could explain the name of the Beach of Coracles on Iona.

In the "Life of Columba" Adomnán, who was Abbot of Iona in 679, mentions an island which was called Hinba. Hinba is described as a favourite of Columba who often lived there. It predated Iona as a centre, and was the meeting place of the 5 abbots, Columba, Brendan, Cormack, Cainnech and Comgell. Adomnán gives most of the clues which we can use to describe Hinba.

The principal references are:

- *“Once the saint came to the island of Hinba, and the same day he granted a relaxation of the rules about diet even for those living in penance.”*
- *“Likewise once the reverend man sent his elderly uncle, Ernán, a priest, to be prior of the monastery he had founded years before on the island of Hinba”, saying: “I do not expect to see you alive again in this world”.*
- *“Once, when the praiseworthy man was living in the island of Hinba, he saw one night in a mental trance an angel of the Lord sent to him. . . . The holy man obeyed the word of the Lord and sailed from Hinba to Iona, where Áedán had arrived at this time, and he ordained him king in accordance with the Lord’s command.”*
- *“Once, four saints who had founded monasteries in Ireland came to visit St Columba. When they arrived at Hinba, they found him there. . . . With them he entered the church as usual on the Lord’s day after the Gospel had been read.”*
- *“On another occasion when St Columba was living in Hinba, the grace of the Holy Spirit was poured upon him in incomparable abundance and miraculously remained over him for three days . . . However, Baithéne was held up by adverse winds in Eigg and could not be present until those three days and three nights of unique and glorious visitation had come to an end.”*

•
Muirbolc Már

- *Fergnae soon afterwards left Ireland and sailed to Hinba, where he spent the rest of his days.. Here he used often to tell the monks of St Columba this story, which he had learnt, as we have said, directly from the lips of the aged saint to whom the vision was itself disclosed.. Fergnae remained for many years in obedience among the brethren and lived faultlessly.. For a further twelve years he withdrew to live in isolation at the place of the anchorites in Muirbolc Már, and died a victorious soldier of Christ.*

From these we can infer that:

- Columba had authority on Hinba and frequently chose to live there.
- It was too far from Eigg for a quick dash.
- Hinba is a short sail from Iona.
- A suitable place for an elderly relative near Iona probably to south or east.
- It was on logical sailing route to Iona from Ireland.

- Hinba had both a monastery and a place for anchorites.
- Was sufficiently fertile: to support 2 communities.
- There was a place there called Muirbolc Már.

It was associated with Brendan and could be expected to be an important church centre for long after. As a mission station it might be close to a pre-Christian population centre. The name indicates that it was a place where waters met. (Inbher) Hinba is the old Irish form of Inbhir which means the meeting of waters. The name Inbhir (Hinba = Inver). The modern spelling is Inver, eg Kilninver, which comes from Cille Inbhir.



The Clachan Sound: A Muirbolc Már ?

The Muirbolc Már is an important clue. Pamela O'Neil in "A Tale of two Hinbas" suggests that the translation of a great sea bag (Gaelic: Muir: large wave, Bolg: bag or bowel, Már: Like) would probably not describe a long complex sea loch like West Loch Tarbet, Jura, as 5th century navigators would not have

pictured the feature from the air. Other places with this name are, steep narrow water catchment areas, where fast water flows rapidly down from a hill to meet a large body of water or loch. Often there is a nearby outcrop or hill called Craig Mohr. It would seem possible, then, that an alternative explanation of the bag-like characteristic of a Muirbolc may lie in its quality of catching and containing rapidly downward-flowing water.

She dismisses the arguments for all contenders suggesting that Canna may have been Hinba. This is based on the material remains to be found there, and the arguments that the anchorage might be a muirbolc már, and that

Baithene was trying to reach Canna when he was storm bound on Eigg. He might just as well have been sheltering in Eigg prior to sailing south: a much more likely scenario. She argues well but it does not convince a sailor.

Which island would fit the description? It would have to be an early mission station at a place where waters meet and have a feature that fits with a Muirbolc Már. It would need to be large and fertile enough to support a large community, have a suitable place for anchorites and be on a logical route between Iona and Dal Riada. Above all it must be a pleasant place to live. Columba's favourite island may still be the favourite of many today.

A number of Islands have been suggested as possible locations for Hinba, including Eileach an Naoimh, Oronsay, Colonsay, Jura, Eilean Mohr, Canna. The arguments for and against are summed up in the table on the next page. For a fuller treatment it is worth reading Pamela O'Neill's "A tale of two Hinbas" (O'Neil, 2008).

TABLE ONE					
	Eileach an naoimh	Oronsay	En Mohr	Jura	Canna
Size: Large enough?	small	small	small		
Can support 100 to 1000 people	no	no	no	?	?
A favourite place of many	yes	yes	yes		
Associated with Brendon	yes	no	no	no	no
An on going Christian tradition	yes				
On Irish trade route	yes	?	?	yes	no
Close S. or E. of Iona	yes	yes	yes	fairly	no
Muirbolc Már narrows	no	no	no	no	weak
Significant remains of period	yes	no	no	no	yes
Name suggests Hinba?	no	no	no	no	no

How do you hide an island? How would the identity of an island be changed? Most likely by a name change, or the translation of a name. Centuries of people living and farming on it may overlay its past role. Names have a way of surviving. Take Eileach an Naoimh (the rocky place of the saint) one of the Garvellachs, thought by some to be Hinba is widely agreed to be the Ailech where Brendan's Life describes him building a monastery. The spelling has changed but it is still called Ailech.

Could this be Hinba?



The Isle of Seil has a long sea pouch comprising the Seil Sound and Clachan Sound. The latter is a perfect example of a Muirbolc Már feature. The adjacent shore is the parish of Kilninver which means the church of inver or Inbhir, the modern spelling of Hinba.

The Standing stones of Duachy (the meeting place) and ancient seat carved

The Isle of Seil

out of stone together with the crannog on Loch Seil suggest an important pre Christian site which would have been a mission for the 5th century Celtic Church. It is well established that Brendon the Navigator established a community on Seil about 560. The Parish is still called Kilbrandon. But despite its importance on the trade route and a logical route from Ireland to Iona it is not mentioned in any of the ancient documents: most likely it had another name.

What does Seil mean? It might be from the Gaelic Saoil (to think or imagine), but there is a more interesting possibility. It may be of Scandinavian origin like so many other islands. The name Siel is found in 19 towns in East Friesland. A Zijl or Syl in East Friesland is a seep or passage of water. 19 Towns in the Netherlands have Siel as part of their name. A siel is a sluice, a dike between two bodies of waters with different water levels (see Ecomare-encyclopedie). In Roman times, hollow trees were blocked until low tide, when the caps were removed and the rush of released water prevented silting of the channel. Siel suggests a place of fast flowing water keeping a narrow channel open. It has almost the same meaning as Inbhir or Hinba. Seil may well be a Norse name for an island with fast flowing narrow channels, previously known as Hinba.

TABLE TWO	
	THE ISLE OF SEIL
Size: Large enough?	yes
Can support 100 to 1000 people	yes
A favourite place many visitors	yes
Associated with Brendon	His 1st base in Argyll
An ongoing Christian tradition	church land till 16th century
On Irish trade route	yes
Close S. Or E. Of Iona	yes
Muirbolc Már narrows	perfect fit
One boat anchorage	yes
Significant remains of period	Brendan's cell and ancient ruins
Name suggests Hinba	Norse means fast flowing water
Has the name of Inbhir	Kilninver means church of Inbhir
Pre christian site nearby	Pre-Christian site near loch Seil
A safe location for retiral	Ideal location for Ernán

How well does Seil fit the description of Hinba?

Seil is a Norse word for fast water flowing. It is a productive, pleasant, sheltered island, near an important meeting place. Clachan Sound is a meeting of waters (inbhir). There are no less than 7 places where waters meet around Seil, all still used by sailors. Brendon established a base here. The island remained in church hands till the 16th Century. The presence of a significant pre-Christian settlement and meeting place on the nearby mainland, would have made the island an appropriate place to establish a mission, while the monastery on Eileach would serve better as a quiet retreat. If the Clachan sound was the muirbolc már there are even remains of an ancient building where an anchorite settlement might have been.

Kilbrandon parish hosted 2 revivals. The Island attracts many visitors, and is only a few yards from Kilninver Parish (Church of Hinba). Seil is Kilbrandon Parish. (The church of Brendon) The island used to support a population of about 1000. Clachan & Seil Sounds can be described by both interpretations of Muirbolc Már.

The Clachan Sound lies under the hill known as "Suidhe Bhreanain" (Brendon's Seat). The narrow north end of the Clachan sound fits the description in the Aberdeen Breviary: "Brendon set his residence on a hill

top whose base stretched into the sea at Sedes Brandani a spot where only one boat could anchor.” From the highest point of this hill you can still see a circle of an ancient building or dun. From this point there is a stunning view of the isles of Lorn and the Ross of Mull behind which lies Iona. Tradition describes this as Brendan’s favourite place to sit. On the North east side of the hill is a stone seat which also bears his name (Gilmour, 2008).

There is a strong case to believe that the isle of Seil may be the isle of Hinba. The surprising factor is that no one suggested it before.

References

- Anderson and Anderson (eds), 1961, *Vita Columbae*, Adomnán’s Life of Columba, 82; Sharpe (trans.), *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*.
Ecomare-encyclopedie (<http://www.ecomare.nl/en/ecomare-encyclopedie/man-and-the-environment/water-management/management-inland-waters/sluides/>)
Gilmour, Nicholas, 2008, St Brendan’s Seat and the Standing Stones of Duachy *Historic Argyll*, p51-57.
O’Neil, Pamela, 2008, A Tale of two Hinbas ” *The Scottish Historical Review*, Volume LXXXVII, 1: No. 223: April 2008,
Reeves, William, (Ed.), 1874, *Life of Saint Columba*, founder of Hy. Written by Adomnán.
Severin, Tim, 1978, *The Brendan Voyage*. Hutchison Publishing Group Ltd.

Further Reading

- Tom Lennie, 2009, *Glory in the Glen* p 55 p 69 -70
Michael Shaw, 1995, *Seil Island a portrait*. p 21
Patrick H. Gillies, *Netherlorn, Argyllshire and its Neighbourhood* Chapter IV Kilbrandon, Ardmaddie.

N.B. “Suidhe Bhreanain” is Gaelic for Brendon’s Seat and the Latin is “Sedes Brandani”

Address for correspondence: Robert. Rae Ardara, Clachan Seil, PA34 4TL.
e - Rob@westwardquest.co.uk