

Mass on the move: bringing worship to the local community



This is the front panel of a fixed stone altar found at Papil, Burra. It is believed to depict the coming of Christianity to Shetland. The monk on the far right is carrying a satchel which may have contained a portable altar.

Christianity reached Shetland during the late 7th century AD. Important religious centres were established in Papil, Burra and St Ninian's Isle in Dunrossness. Early chapels were probably built of wood and later replaced with stone structures.

The earliest church altars were probably ordinary wooden tables until the establishment of fixed stone altars. Before Holy Communion or the Eucharist could be held, the altar first had to be blessed by the local Bishop. It had to be large enough to accommodate the chalice (vessel) which held wine, and a paten (plate) for bread. The altar often contained relics, usually the bones of holy saints, held within a cavity.

When it was accepted by the church that Communion had to be delivered from a dedicated altar, the use of portable altars became a necessity. Religious services could be held in the countryside, where chapels with fixed altars had not been established, or in homes if parishioners were unable to attend due to sickness. The priest would carry his altar with him, perhaps in a leather satchel.

Portable altars were sometimes marked with five crosses, depicting the wounds of Christ on the cross. Some were made from wood with the relic cavity covered by a piece of recycled marble or *porfido verde antico*. This exotic marble must have been brought into Scotland from churches and important buildings in Rome during the Early Christian period. Religious pilgrims may have taken them back as souvenirs, or to be used as relic covers.