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‘A local response to a wider situation: The archaeology of a clan stronghold of Dùn Èistean, Isle of Lewis’¹

By RACHEL C BARROWMAN

SUMMARY: Dùn Èistean stands at the end of a long tradition of clan strongholds seen in the MacLeod lordship of the western seaboard of north-west Scotland in the medieval and early post-medieval periods. Excavations on the site have shown that it was in repeated use for refuge in times of trouble in the 16th and early 17th centuries, acting as a power centre caught up in the wider political scene. The inhabitants of Dùn Èistean were a people with a strong local identity, using their traditional building techniques, adapting to available raw materials and drawing on the resources of the surrounding environment to support and defend the inhabitants in the face of incoming attack.

INTRODUCTION

Dùn Èistean is situated in *Cnoc Àrd* (Knockaird) in Ness, at the north end of the Isle of Lewis (NB 5352 6499: Fig. 1). A small tidal island or stack, it covers an area of 120m x 70m and is separated from the Ness mainland by sheer cliffs 16m high, either side of a 15m-wide gap (Fig. 2). The name probably derives from the Norse *stein*, meaning ‘stone, boulder, standing stone’, which may apply to the whole rocky island, or from the Old Norse *Eiðsstein*, ‘the steinn of the isthmus’.² The top of Dùn Èistean is relatively flat, with a gently sloping rise to the highest point on the north-east side. Unlike the majority of Ness, it is not owned by the local estate (now a community-owned estate, the *Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn* (Galson Estate Trust)), but by the Clan Morrison Society, who bought the site in 1967. Antiquarians recorded an oral tradition in the 19th century that Dùn Èistean was the stronghold of the clan,

and since then many Morrisons throughout the diaspora have considered it the Morrison ancestral home. The tidal island can now be easily accessed via a steel footbridge that was erected in time for the Clan Morrison gathering in July 2002, when hundreds of Morrisons from North America, Britain and further afield were able to walk onto the site for the first time. This has opened up the site to the public, when previously it was only accessible during low tide by scrambling up the precipitous cliffs.

Archaeological survey and excavation on Dùn Èistean was initiated in 1999 by the Clan Morrison Societies of America and Scotland. The Morrisons approached the then *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar* (Western Isles Council) archaeologist Mary MacLeod, who, with local Morrisons and the *Comunn Eachdraidh Nis* (Ness Historical Society), set up the Dùn Èistean Archaeology Project, or DEAP, which went on to secure funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Historic Scotland and the Western Isles Council. Fieldwork took place between 2000 and 2007, was managed by Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division (GUARD), now GUARD Archaeology Ltd (GAL), and comprised excavations on Dùn Èistean as well as an archaeological survey of the entire north end of the Ness peninsula. The excavations and survey have now been written up, and are due to be published in 2015 by Acair Ltd, based in Stornoway.³

Below is an overview of the findings from the excavations, post-excavation analyses and research, followed by a discussion of some of the more pertinent aspects of the archaeology. A note on the historical background is included, based on research undertaken by MacCoinnich and Stiùbhart after the completion of the post-excavation analyses so as to provide a setting for the archaeological evidence.⁴ The Dùn Èistean project was designed to be multi-disciplinary, and whilst avoiding ‘general historical conceptions at the cost of relegating the field evidence to a supporting chorus,’⁵ the historical background adds a depth to the material evidence that is not possible from the archaeological remains alone. The second section of the paper brings these findings together and discusses the evidence for

short-lived occupation and unrest on the site, the functioning of the stronghold within the northern extremity of the MacLeod lordship, and the particular local response seen in the economy of the site despite its being embroiled in the wider political world.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF DÙN ÈISTEAN

Figure 3 was taken some time in the 1970s, and shows the remains of buildings and other features on the island that can be clearly seen as groups of grassy humps and bumps, a large circular mound of rubble on the highest point, a pond in the centre, and a long, low grassy bank atop the cliff edges on the landward sides. When the DEAP project began, a topographic survey of these features included those on the Ness mainland immediately opposite (Fig 4).⁶ Geophysical survey and excavation of small trial trenches to test the archaeological deposits followed this in 2001-3, which developed into large-scale excavations on the island in 2005-7.⁷ With the completion of the post-excavation analyses and radiocarbon dating, a Bayesian statistical model using OxCal 4.1.4 was applied and allowed the identification of two broad phases of activity – the earliest grouped between AD 1440-1635 and the second spanning AD 1465-1670.⁸ When this is combined with the material from later deposits, three episodes emerge; the first two taking place some time between the late 1400s and early 1600s, and the third in the late 1600s to early 1800s.⁹ There is evidence that the stronghold was occupied several times within each of these episodes, but it is impossible to define all of these uses more specifically than to group them into the three general Episodes, I, II and III. Apart from a small collection of potentially prehistoric quartz found scattered throughout the site all the material and buildings excavated from Dùn Èistean have been radiocarbon dated to the 15th century onwards.¹⁰

The first buildings and features to be built and used on the site (General Event I) included a lookout tower or keep, a defensive wall around the landward perimeter of the

island, houses and huts for shelter and storage, kilns to dry oats and barley and to fire pottery. The most striking building on the site excavated from the first general event is the rectangular tower (Structure G), in local tradition called '*Tigh nan Arm*' or House of the Arms or Armoury.¹¹ This sits on a natural rock platform on the highest point of the island and would originally have had commanding views across the Minch to Sutherland and Assynt and along the Lewis coastline. It had two storeys; a solid earthen base built from thick double walls around a small sub-rectangular chamber and an upper storey of clay-bonded stonework. Excavation discovered a defect in the construction of the tower indicating that during the first stages of building, the wall base slumped and collapsed before it was finished.¹² It was rebuilt and repaired with walling up to 2m thick at its base, a slight inwards batter to the coursed outer stonework and large stones keyed into the earthen core. The new walling was simply built around the collapsed first attempt, suggesting a degree of haste in the tower construction (Fig. 5). Lintel stones hint at a window or a door halfway up the south side of the tower wall, and iron nails indicate that driftwood timbers were used to support the roof.¹³ Compared with other buildings on the site, the assemblages of finds and environmental material from Structure G are small, but include local pottery, gunflints, burnt cereal grains, mammal bone fragments, peat and charcoal. This is evidence for the incorporation of domestic and hearth waste into the earthen cores of the tower walls. Two notable finds of a complete schist whetstone and a sherd from a late medieval/post-medieval glazed pot were recovered from a patch of walling material found on the old ground surface at the base of the tower wall and may be used to refine the radiocarbon date for range for the building of the tower towards the latter half of the 16th century onwards.

Excavation of areas in a triangular-shaped enclosure on the west side of the island uncovered Structures A1 and A2. These rectangular dwellings comprised low stone and earth walls around a central hearth, roofed with turf and with an entrance in the east side,¹⁴ Artefactual material from the hearth deposits suggests that cooking, eating and drinking took

place inside these dwellings, with gunflints and lead projectiles being made at the hearthside. On the east side of the island two structures stood at the top of *Palla na Biorlinn* (Ledge, or Gully, of the Birlinn), a natural gully with access down to the sea.¹⁵ These small huts were set into the back of the terrace in the hillside and may have been used as lookout posts to guard a landing stage and watch along the coast and out across the Minch. Excavations in F1 showed that it was built from turf walls with an inner drystone face curving around to a double-faced wall with an entrance in the seaward side. Two phases of occupation in the form of floor layers and hearth sweepings were identified, overlying a carefully built drain to channel water out from the slope behind. These two phases of occupation followed each other in quick succession with no build-up of abandonment deposits between them and the artefact assemblages from them are very similar. The notable finds of a misshapen musket ball, discarded in the fire after being poorly cast in a two-part mould, and a piece of lead scrap, are evidence for the casting of lead projectiles inside this hut.

Defence against attack from the Ness mainland was provided by a perimeter wall (Structure H), which protected the entire landward side of the island. Excavation indicated a stone-faced, turf and earth core construction with signs of later repair.¹⁶ Like the tower, the earthen core of the wall contained sherds of local pottery, lithics, charcoal, carbonised cereal and plant remains, suggesting that the material used to build it derived from areas of contemporary occupation on the site. The slight remains of two buildings adjacent to the perimeter wall are further evidence for several phases of occupation and activity during General Event I. On the west side of the island, excavations revealed the robbed-out footings of a stone and earth wall and a spread of occupation material, despite a lack of evidence from geophysical and topographical survey in this area. On the east side the wall footings of the corner of a building, an old ground surface and dumps of ash and burnt material were found below later Structure D. A gun flint, flint flakes, sherds of local pottery, peat ash, rowan, oak and birch charcoal, burnt oats, barley and a hazelnut found in the occupation material from

these robbed-out buildings suggest that like other buildings on the site it was used for shelter and cooking until being dismantled and re-cycled into new buildings either within Episode I, or, more likely, during Episode II when new Structures B and D were built (see below). Thick deposits of ash and other hearth debris were also found below the walls of B and D and probably derive from Episode I occupation.¹⁷ These thick deposits contained thousands of burnt oat and barley grains and burnt straw, suggesting the drying and processing of grain on more than just a small domestic hearth. This, alongside evidence for small-scale metal-working and gunflint manufacture.

Buildings from Episode I associated with the processing and storage of resources were excavated on two different parts of the site. The most substantial was a large building identified as a corn-drying kiln barn on the south side of the island. The remains of an old ground surface were found in and around the building, constructed from stone-faced walls with earthen cores (see Fig. 6).¹⁸ Few artefacts were found in the Structure C walls compared with the number found in other buildings suggesting that it was built on a relatively 'clean' and previously unoccupied part of the site. This was confirmed by the analysis of soil samples taken from the walls of the building. Analysis of small deposits of ash in the kiln flue shows that a fire of peat and driftwood were used to dry oats and barley.

In the east area of the island the remains of a large bonfire, or clamp kiln used to fire pottery was found below a later turf shelter, D7.¹⁹ When this feature had gone out of use, the resulting hollow was subsequently modified in General event III into a small turf shelter, and meant that the surface of the fire deposits had become covered by turf collapse and trampled. Environmental and soils analysis of ash deposits in the fire contained a large assemblage of burnt (mainly animal) bone, and it is possible that bones left over from meat preparation and/or consumption were deliberately collected for fuel together with driftwood and peat. Soils analysis identified the remains of a collapsed turf layer in the fire. Small quantities of alder, ash and oak suggest the remains of a mat or woven layer placed over the fire on which

to place the pots before being clamped with turfs. Pot sherds found around the feature included an almost complete pot found smashed on the original ground surface adjacent to it.²⁰

These buildings and structures provided the means to store and dry grain as well as to fire pottery, indicating the use of a considerable range of resources. A pond had been dug at the lowest point on the island, presumably in order to collect water as there is no natural spring on Dùn Èistean. This was probably in use during all the events I, II and III and a radiocarbon date of the sediments in the basal deposits of the pond (surveyed as Structure E) produced a date contemporary with the main occupation in the late 15th to early 17th centuries (1440-1640 cal AD).²¹

There is no doubt that all these structures were built as part of a unit, and functioned together as a whole during General Event I. This was also the case in General Event II, but there seems to have been an increase in the population of the settlement during this event. The corn-drying kiln, tower and perimeter wall remained in use, and houses A1 and A2 and building F1 on the east side of the island were re-occupied, but the site was expanded when two new groups of buildings, Structures B and D, were built against the perimeter wall on the east and west sides of the island. Both structures comprised conglomerated buildings of small turf and stone circular or sub-rectangular buildings with conjoining walls. Within Structure B, B1 and B4-6 were built together as one unit with B1, the largest building at the west end of the complex, separated from the rest by a metre-wide gap. B1 had a sunken floor with central peat hearth and may have acted as the main gathering and eating place for the whole complex.²² Despite no evidence for hearths in buildings B4-6, the compact and clayey floor deposits contained charcoal, small lumps of peat ash and fragments of pottery indicating some occupation. A low platform defined by stones was found against the west wall of B4 and may have been used for sitting or sleeping. If this feature is indeed a bed, it is a rare pre-eighteenth century turf and stone example.²³

At the narrowest part of the gap between the island and the Ness mainland, the buildings of Structure B were probably used as lookout shelters, with the whole probably guarding the two main access points onto the island. Gaps in the south walls of the buildings where they abutted the perimeter wall may originally have been used to lookout across the gap to the Ness mainland. A cutting through the perimeter wall where the breach between the island and the mainland was at its narrowest was paved and lined with stone and served as one of the entrances into the site, where supplies may have been pulled up onto the island. According to local *Cnoc Àrd* resident, Angus Morrison, sheep were hauled up onto the island using a rope at the same spot in the recent past,²⁴

To the east of Structure B another complex of small, conglomerrated buildings, Structure D was built against the perimeter wall on the south side of the island. Excavation reveals that at least three buildings; D5, D6 and D12, were built, centred on an open rectangular courtyard, D16, with had access to the perimeter wall.²⁵ It is not possible to reconstruct what the whole of this complex would have looked like as the ruins of most of the structures were subsequently dismantled to build later turf shelters (see General Event III below) and only 50% of the complex was excavated. However, it is clear that there was access from D5 and D6 into courtyard D16, and given its large span, it seems unlikely that the courtyard itself was roofed. The excavation of several floor and hearth deposits found in the courtyard suggest that it was extensively used, and was perhaps a main gathering place for the inhabitants of the island. Material found in a robbed out building, D12, on the west side of the structure includes sherds from a glazed Cologne stoneware wine bottle dating to the end of the 16th century.²⁶

Following the second general event the stronghold was abandoned and the buildings left to collapse and decay. The island was used intermittently for shelter, with small makeshift turf huts or bothies built with minimal use of stone (usually just the basal course lining the interior of the shelter). None of the General Event III shelters that were excavated had a

hearth, and the majority of the artefactual material found in them derived from the debris of the older ruined buildings beneath them. The later glass and pottery found in these huts can date them to some time between the end of the 1600s, and the beginning of the 1800s.²⁷ Dùn Èistean was part of the agricultural landscape of Ness at this time and was used as a place to keep and tend the cattle and sheep away from the arable crops during the growing season (as seen on other uninhabited off-shore islands in the Hebrides at this time).²⁸ They are a reflection of the intensification of agriculture in Ness due to population increase and improvements initiated by the Seaforth MacKenzies in the 1700s, and were in use intermittently into the 1800s.²⁹

A NOTE ON THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Although Martin Martin describes Dùn Èistean as a fort in 1703, it was antiquarian, Captain Frederick W L Thomas, RN, FSA (Scot) who first recorded the oral traditions linking the Morrisons (Morisons) with Dùn Èistean. After Ordnance Survey surveyors spoke to local man John Morison in 1852, they recorded Dùn Èistean as

‘a small round Island which is arable on the Sea Shore and Isolated only at high water. There is the ruins of some kind of building on the highest point of it which appears more at present like a heap of stones thrown together than the ruin of a castle as the name Signifies. Nothing regarding it can be collected from the neighbouring people. There are other ruins on the Island beside that considered as the castle’.³⁰

This change when Thomas’s paper 1878 ‘On the Traditions of the Morrisons’ published in 1878 brought the archaeological remains on the island to the attention of the scholarly world.³¹ Thomas was a Captain in the Royal Navy and worked for the Admiralty Hydrographic Office. In 1857, he was sent to join Captain Henry C Otter, director of the Scottish Survey who had been charting the waters around the Western Isles since 1846.³² Thomas met Malcolm MacPhail, a Free Church student from Shawbost, who worked as a

teacher in Lionel school in Ness.³³ The two developed an enthusiasm for archaeological sites in Lewis, and MacPhail, on Thomas' behalf, began conducting detailed surveys and collecting local traditions relating to the duns, including Dùn Èistean.³⁴ The findings from MacPhail's 'detailed surveys' and collection of local oral traditions from Ness, were used extensively by Thomas in both his articles 'Duns of the Outer Hebrides' and 'Traditions of the Morrisons (Clan MacGhillemuire), hereditary judges of Lewis'.³⁵ In this article Thomas states that at the end of the 16th century; '...the Morrisons fortified themselves in Dun Eystein, at Ness', going on to describe the remains on the island and traditions attached to them, including 'The remains of a strong wall follow the edge of the cliff on the landward side of the island, and through the wall there are said to have been squints or loopholes for observation and defence', 'a dùn or castle, sometimes called Tigh nam Arm; or the House of Arms, now but 4½ feet high' and 'the remains of huts upon the island; and on the south sides is a flat ledge, called *Palla na Biorlinn*, or the Ledge of the Galley or Birlin, whereon tradition tells that the Morrisons used to haul up their boat'.³⁶ Pulling a boat alongside the ledges around Dùn Èistean can be compared to the annual *guga* (young gannet) hunt that takes place 40 miles out at sea. Here, ten Ness sailors offload their supplies onto the rocky stack of *Sula Sgeir* with great skill and seamanship.³⁷ There are many photographs held in the *Comunn Eachdraidh Nis* (Ness Historical Society) of the *Sula Sgeir* trip over the years – including photographs of the crew in the 1930s pulling their boat right out of the water and on to the rocks. Whilst we should be cautious about drawing parallels, it seems most likely that the seamanship of the *Nisich* (people from Ness) three hundred years prior to this was at least comparable, if not better, and the *Palla na Biorlinn* would have been an accessible landing stage.

Thomas states that 'These legends, along with most of the foregoing tales, have been selected either from the manuscript "Traditions of Lewis", written by Mr John Morrison, cooper, Stornoway or from the Rev. M MacPhail's "Traditions of Ness", which were obligingly collected by him in answer to my request for information concerning the 'Brieve of

Lewis'.³⁸ His statement that '...the Morrisons fortified themselves in Dun Eystein, at Ness', is probably taken from one of two almost identical documents written some time around the 1630s.³⁹ One of these sources is by Sir Robert Gordon, and is cited by Thomas later in his article. Both sources state "...the breiwe and his kinn ... strengthened themselfe within a fort in the Iland called ness". Perhaps Thomas had access to an oral tradition recorded by Macphail that identified the un-named 'fort in the Iland called neise' as being Dùn Èistean. Certainly Dùn Èistean would be an obvious candidate for the fort in Ness given the remains that are on the island.

The DEAP took a multidisciplinary approach throughout the fieldwork and post-excavation analyses, drawing on both archaeological and historical research, working with historians Aonghas MacCoinnich and Dòmhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart, whose studies of the historical background to the site are an invaluable part of the publication and place the archaeology in context.⁴⁰ They identify that the Morrisons were first known as the *britheamhan* or 'brieve' kindred, a family of hereditary judges in the historical record in the later 16th century, and at this time had a 'kindly right' to the lands of Ness within the MacLeod lordship. Stiùbhart highlights the tradition that the whole north end of Ness was considered a sanctuary in the medieval period wherein the brieves operated under the jurisdiction of the MacLeods.⁴¹ Dùn Èistean was in a strategic position within this Lordship, with a vista onto the busy seaways surrounding Ness. MacCoinnich reminds us that as followers of the MacLeods, the Morrisons probably appeared in other areas of the trans-Minch Lordship and he highlights the significance of rich fishing grounds around northern Scotland.⁴² This was of particular relevance to Lewis when the Scottish Crown attempted to establish a plantation of Fife noblemen and merchants in 1598 to bring stability to the area and exploit the lucrative fishing grounds. This ultimately unsuccessful plan exacerbated local unrest and infighting in the decade up to the MacKenzie takeover, including the slighting of local strongholds and pockets of resistance, such as Dùn Èistean. Lewismen's involvement in

the Irish Wars, and in piracy and raiding between Lewis and the Northern Isles, also both add to the backdrop of trouble and unrest that is recorded in the history of Lewis at this time,. MacCoinnich's outline of the historical evidence for the use of firearms in the Highlands and Islands at this time is particularly fascinating in this context.⁴³

DISCUSSION

The following brief resumé is concerned with the first two general events, those dating to the 1500s and early 1600s, and in particular draws out three main trends observed in the excavated evidence from the site.

SPORADIC SHORT-LIVED OCCUPATION AND UNREST

The archaeological deposits excavated across the site demonstrate that there were successive short bursts of building, rebuilding and repair within the first two general events on the site in the 16th and early 17th centuries. Some of the excavated buildings survived only as wall footings, suggesting that they had been robbed to provide material for later buildings. Occupation material such as pottery sherds, charcoal, peat ash and carbonised plant remains was also found incorporated into the wall cores of many of the buildings, and layers of occupation material were found below wall footings. In short, traces of successive use/abandonment/re-use were found in all the structure groups, A-D, F and H, within Episodes I and II. There was also a lack of midden build-ups from prolonged occupation, with waste simply thrown out of doorways and collecting just outside buildings, as at A1, B6 and F1 for instance (although the expedient burning and dumping of rubbish into the sea no doubt also took place). Soils analysis of samples from all the buildings showed that some were built on a 'clean' previously unoccupied area of the site, whereas others were built in areas that were already in occupation.⁴⁴ In addition to this the layers in the hearths in the buildings all

contained evidence for short-lived, successive use, the soils analysis demonstrated that rebuilding and repairing of walls and buildings was an ongoing activity, necessary with each use of the site. Along with the specialist analysis of the radiocarbon dating results, all of which were of the same 16th to 17th century range, concludes that this was a site in repeated use.⁴⁵

There is some evidence to suggest the deliberate demolition of two of the structures. After the end of General Event II when the stronghold was abandoned, all of the structures on the site collapsed and degraded. However, the collapsed stonework excavated from around the tower was divided into two sharply defined layers of stone rubble, including corner and lintel stones. This may suggest that the upper stone tower had suffered a rapid and catastrophic collapse, and it remains a possibility that it was deliberately demolished. The construction of the tower is also suggestive of a rapid response to an imminent threat or attack as it appears to have been thrown up hurriedly, to such an extent that it fell down half way through construction and was then repaired in haste with the tower base walls simply rebuilt around the failed first attempt. In addition to this, soils analysis of the deposits in hut F1 on the east side of the island showed that it collapsed relatively suddenly as the boundary between the collapse layers and the floor layer is very sharp, suggesting that the turf roof and/or upper turf walls collapsed whilst the structure was in use, or only just abandoned.⁴⁶ This may indicate that this structure was also deliberately slighted. It was certainly never re-occupied.

There is evidence from across the site for the manufacture and use of gunflints and lead projectiles. Ballin, who first published the findings in this journal from his analysis, identifies used gunflints as well as manufacturing waste. The size of these suggests that they were used with smaller firearms.⁴⁷ He is in no doubt that guns were discharged on the site and suggests that this occurred during one or more sieges. He also indicates a form of ad hoc production from a limited supply of raw material, and, with the pre-18th century date makes this gunflint assemblage unique in Britain. Ferguson in turn has studied the assemblage of

lead projectiles and acknowledges that the pistol and musket balls are most likely to represent the debris of multiple events of conflict, with those found in collapsed wall deposits indicating that the buildings were standing at the time of fighting.⁴⁸

The archaeology thus suggests that Dùn Èistean was in use repeatedly, during times of occasional conflict and with possible evidence for deliberate destruction in the tower and the hut F1. Indeed, although we would never be able to tie the archaeological evidence to a specific event, it would seem reasonable to suggest that Dùn Èistean is the ‘fort in Ness’ wherein Morrison brieves took refuge, despite it not being named in the historical accounts. As outlined above, MacCoinnich also suggests that it is a very likely possibility that the site was involved in the skirmishes and conflict seen at the time of the Fife Adventurers and the years leading to the MacKenzie takeover.⁴⁹ The archaeological evidence is not inconsistent with this.

A STRONGHOLD WITHIN THE MACLEOD LORDSHIP

Other than the stronghold to which the Morrisons took refuge in times of trouble, there are other sites within Ness that are traditionally associated with the Morrisons and the former MacLeod Lordship. The Ness Archaeological Landscape Survey undertaken as part of the Dùn Èistean project has surveyed two of these.⁵⁰ The site of *An Taigh Mòr* (the Big House), traditionally considered to be the Brieve’s House from which they would dispense justice, located on the Habost machair on the west coast of Ness, and *Cnoc a’ Chaisteal* (Hill of the Castle), to the north, also known as *Caisteal Olghair* (Olaus’ Castle) in local tradition, and considered to have been built by the first MacLeods of Lewis.⁵¹ Geophysical survey of *An Taigh Mòr* identified a large rectangular building at the site, as well as evidence for enclosures and cultivation and extensive settlement mounds and scatters of pottery across the machair to the north.⁵² Geophysical survey over the site of *Cnoc a’ Chaisteal*, identified evidence for metal-working and a possible rectangular building.⁵³ This site lies at the heart of

an extensive medieval landscape, which includes *An Taigh Mòr*, the upstanding medieval church of *Teampall Mholuaidh* (St Moluag's church) in *Eòropaidh* (Eoropie) that was traditionally considered to be the MacLeod's church, and of course Dùn Èistean.⁵⁴

Little remains of these sites. Most of the ruins of the late medieval/early post-medieval landscape of Ness were swept away during 19th century crofting re-organization and agricultural improvements in the area, with the exception of many of the small coastal chapels.⁵⁵ Collaboration of the Dùn Èistean project with the 'Estates, Residences and Schools of Gaelic Learned Families c. 1300-1650' project, led by Elizabeth FitzPatrick of NUI Galway, was useful in illuminating what may once have taken place at *An Taigh Mòr*. The *Uí Dhábhoireann* (O'Davorens) *brehons* at *Cathair Mhic Nechtain* (Cahermacnaghten), Burren, Co Clare were a legal family to the Ó Lochlainn lordship as the Morrison *britheamhan* in Ness were to the MacLeods of Lewis. In classical Gaelic tradition, each legal family would have had a *sgoilteagh* (schoolhouse). Here, the law would be taught and texts compiled and copied. FitzPatrick's excavations of '*Cabhail Tighe Breac*', the ruins of a large house thought possibly to have been a *sgoilteagh* uncovered material diagnostic of school activity. By comparison with this Irish *brehon* family we may get a glimpse of the importance that the *An Taigh Mòr*, Habost may once have held in the world of the MacLeod's brieves.⁵⁶ As far as excavated evidence goes however, Dùn Èistean is the only 'Lordship' site from this period to have been excavated in Ness, or indeed Lewis.

These excavations have confirmed that Dùn Èistean was a stronghold and place of refuge occupied for short periods of time in the late medieval/early post-medieval periods, with the provision of buildings for accommodation, gathering and for the storage of provisions and fuel, access to fresh drinking water, and the means to dry grain and fire pottery. As a defended site it stands at the end of a long tradition of clan strongholds and stone-built castles that appeared along the western seaboard and islands after the 13th century, the most important being Finlaggan, Islay, the centre of the Lords of the Isles.⁵⁷ Excavations

here by David Caldwell between 1990 and 1994, and 1997, uncovered a significant group of finds and buildings on two of the islands in Loch Finlaggan, *Eilean Mòr* and the smaller, *Eilean na Comhairle*, all spanning the period from the 13th to the 16th centuries. His work has identified that Finlaggan in the Middle Ages comprised a castle on *Eilean na Comhairle*, and over twenty buildings, including a hall and a chapel within timberwork defences, on the adjacent *Eilean Mòr*. Whilst Dùn Èistean post-dates Finlaggan, being associated instead with the period following the demise of the Lords of the Isles, it functioned both as a place of refuge and a symbol of power and prestige within its territory, and as such Dùn Èistean was to all intents and purposes a castle: a strong curtain wall with an entrance gap and gatehouse, enclosing both a tower and a courtyard area within which stood accommodation and subsidiary buildings.

The tower on Dùn Èistean also fits into the tradition of small medieval towers or keeps found throughout the Western Isles, often on small islet duns in inshore lochs, such as *Caisteal Calabhaigh* (Castle Calvay) on the east side of South Uist at the mouth of Loch Boisdale, *Caisteal Bheagram* (Castle Beagram) in an inland loch in Drimsdale, South Uist, *Caisteal a' Bhreabhair* on a stack to the south of Eriskay and *Dùn MhicLeòid* (Sinclair's Castle, or MacLeod's Castle) on an artificial island in Loch Tangusdale, Barra. All include small, two to three-storey rectangular towers of around 6m x 5m.⁵⁸ These sites are attributed to the MacNeils and the Clanranald, and like Dùn Èistean, date to the 16th and 17th centuries.⁵⁹ However, they are all built from lime-mortared stonework, none having the same almost solid earth lower storey or earthen wall cores and use of turf seen in the Dùn Èistean tower.

The construction techniques used on the Dùn Èistean tower may have been particular to the MacLeod lordship. During excavation it was noted that the walls of the tower base were built with a slight inwards batter, a feature seen in 19th-century blackhouses in Lewis (e.g. see Fig. 7), but also at the nearby medieval church of *Teampall Mholuaidh* in Eoropie, which is

traditionally considered to be a MacLeod church.⁶⁰ A small-scale excavation around the outside of the church in 1977 revealed that it had been built onto the undisturbed clay subsoil without formal foundations, despite its massive size, and the lower courses of the walls were strengthened with a battered plinth to spread the load of the gable walls and prevent subsidence.⁶¹ Barber notes that this is also a feature seen at St Clement's Church in Rodel, Harris (also linked to the MacLeods), and suggests that it may be a Hebridean tradition, saying that whilst there is not direct evidence to support it, 'the possibility that Teampull Mholuaidh was, like St Clement's, built in the 16th century cannot be ruled out'.⁶² The battered walls of the tower on Dùn Èistean do not require a plinth as they are built onto rock not clay. However, it is a high status building, and it is possible that the use of battered walls was a particular local technique used in the MacLeod territories, where it is also seen in castles such as Caisteal Maol in Skye, a simple four-storey rectangular tower that guards the straits of Kyleakin between Skye from the mainland.⁶³

Due to its strategic location Dùn Èistean would have acted as a symbol of power, and had a role to play in the control of the seaways around Ness within the former MacLeod lordship. This aspect is hard to infer from the archaeological remains alone. Breen has drawn attention to Gaelic Ireland where tower houses and defensive sites found around the coasts are thought to have been used to control access to fishing grounds and collect taxes and levies for landing or supply of victuals from those fishing in the jurisdiction of a Gaelic lord's territory.⁶⁴ It is being increasingly recognised that the coastal tower houses of Ireland were also not only defensive, but like Dùn Èistean, located at key control and entry points to the Gaelic lordships in which they were built. This included the control of sea resources, and for this they had to be, like Dùn Èistean, effective watchtowers.⁶⁵ A small assemblage of finds from the site indicate that the occupants of Dùn Èistean were in touch with the wider contacts and trading routes of the 16th and 17th centuries. The rare find in north-west Scotland of rim and neck sherds of Cologne stoneware are identified by Will as dating to between AD1525-

1575. They originate from a bottle of wine, possibly traded from merchants using the sea routes up and down the Minch between Europe, the Northern Isles and Ireland.⁶⁶ In addition to this two coins were found on the site. The first is identified as a billon plack of James VI comparable to coins found at Castle Maol, Skye that were deposited shortly after 1601. The second is an English sixpence, a commonly-found coin that was struck in large numbers by Elizabeth I from 1561 until 1602, that was also probably lost on the site some time in the early 17th century.⁶⁷ Whilst we do not know how or why these finds came to be on Dùn Èistean, they are nevertheless a glimpse of the wider world with which the inhabitants of Dùn Èistean had contact at this time.

The location of the site also indicates that it was part of a wider phenomenon. Survey work by the Severe Terrain Archaeological Campaign (STAC) and the Ness Archaeological Landscape Survey (NALS) on the east coast dùn sites identified a shift of strategic importance in Lewis from the west to the east coast during the late medieval period, and this is undoubtedly linked to the defence and monitoring of the MacLeod territories on both sides of the Minch.⁶⁸ Of these sites, Dùn Èistean is the furthest north, with *Dùn Eòrodail*, *Dun Bhiliscleitir*, *Dun Othail* and *Caisteal a'Mhorair*, to the south. Also, at the entrance to Anchor Bay in Stornoway, where the MacLeods had their own stronghold of Stornoway castle in the early 16th century, a further site comparable to Dùn Èistean is found at *Rubha Shildinis* on the south coast of Holm and may have guarded the MacLeod waters in and around Stornoway. Whilst it has been suggested that this site is of Norse date⁶⁹ it is very similar in appearance to the buildings and walling seen on Dùn Èistean and has yet to be investigated.

Whilst there is historical and archaeological evidence for the re-use of Iron Age dùn sites in Lewis and further afield in the Western Isles in the late medieval period,⁷⁰ at Dùn Èistean there was evidence that the stronghold had been built from scratch in the late 15th to 16th centuries, and for a specific purpose. Raven has already drawn attention to this phenomenon in South Uist, citing the two unexcavated island duns of *Eilean Bheagram* and

Dùn Raouill as examples for which there is no evidence for prehistoric antecedence, implying that they may have been built in the medieval period on new territory.⁷¹ There will undoubtedly be many other comparable sites in the north and west Highlands and Islands. Furthermore, given the historical evidence for raiding and piracy between Lewis and Orkney and Shetland, it could be postulated that some (not all) of the coastal settlements found on offshore stacks and precipitous headlands in the Northern Isles may also date to this later medieval period. A re-evaluation of these coastal settlements, including those traditionally thought to be Iron Age, or Norse, is perhaps due given this evidence. Indeed Lamb, in his initial survey of the coastal settlements of the north, notes that many have an immediate view only of the sea and not the land with which they are connected.⁷²

A PARTICULAR LOCAL RESPONSE

There is a unique local element in the archaeology of Dùn Èistean that must not be overlooked. Archaeologists strive to infer culture based on often scant evidence and to apply this to wider historical context, but in our quest for the global we must not overlook the local. Whilst Dùn Èistean is undoubtedly part of a phenomenon of clan strongholds seen throughout the north and west seaboard at this time, in outward appearance and the building techniques used, it has more in common with the local settlements lived in by the poorer Ness inhabitants in the late medieval period, than with the high status castles of the Lordship. Being largely built from stone and earth, turf and driftwood the tower on Dùn Èistean differs in appearance to most of the lime-mortared masonry castles and tower houses elsewhere in the Lordship (in the Uists and Barra for instance), where high status dwellings were built from masonry and mortar, and vernacular (low status) buildings from turf and stone. On Dùn Èistean, both the local vernacular architecture and the castle are built from turf and stone and as such the site is a unique local interpretation of the concept of a castle, built with materials that were to hand and using tried and tested local methods.

In addition to this, in the detail of the archaeological material recovered from the excavations it can be seen that many aspects of life on the stack remained unchanged from generation to generation of use, with a continued reliance on the local land and marine resources. With each re-occupation of this dynamic site, the same building methods and resources are used with the same recourse to local knowledge and materials, reflective of a communal, shared heritage. The soils analysis work on samples taken from the different buildings on the site showed that a wide range of materials were used to build the walls, but that local stone, probably from the surrounding cliff line and rocky shore, and the sandy soils from the island, were the main component, often mixed with domestic midden and ash from the site. The tower, although constructed from well-built, stone-faced walls, still utilised the deliberate stacking of different materials in the wall cores (see Fig. 8) that were then trampled and ‘puddled’, a method still seen in the last century in blackhouse buildings. The clay bonding of the upper storey is also identified by the soils analysis as being of local origin.⁷³ In all the ancillary buildings, tried and tested local methods were followed, utilising the local, vernacular design. In the later 18th and 19th centuries there is a rich Gàidhlig local vocabulary associated with this, demonstrating that there were often certain ways of doing things within each district or area of the Western Isles, with every small detail having its own special term even with the introduction of the blackhouse in the 19th century.⁷⁴ The evidence for localised building techniques seen on Dùn Èistean suggests that this regionalisation may long have been in the psyche of the inhabitants of Ness, perhaps as a response to a particularly challenging physical and political environment and available local resources.

Within the environmental and artefactual assemblages a picture of self-sufficiency also emerges. As well as the evidence for the ad hoc production of gunflints and lead projectiles on the site discussed above, and a small assemblage of metalworking waste,⁷⁵ the assemblage of locally hand-made coarse pottery is the largest recovered from a late/post-medieval site in the Hebrides (e.g. see Fig. 9). This is the first large stratified and radiocarbon

dated assemblage of this date to be published.⁷⁶ Campbell identifies that craggans are not, as previously thought, a late form of earlier Iron Age pottery traditions, but a unique local development of a construction technique widespread in the Hebrides. Traditionally, this was simply-made and fired on the domestic hearth (although a proportion of the pottery from Dùn Èistean may have been fired in the clamp kiln). The clay used to make the pots is of immediate local origin, derived from glacial tills, in turn derived from the underlying Lewisian gneisses, and is full of coarse rock fragments and minerals derived from the breakdown of these rocks.

A rare assemblage of thousands of carbonised oat and barley grains are also recorded from the site, with evidence that most cereal processing occurred before the grain was brought on to the island.⁷⁷ Pollen analysis of the core sample taken from the pond identifies that agriculture was being practiced in the wider area of the Ness mainland at the time and the production, drying and processing of oats and barley was a major part of life for the occupants of Dùn Èistean. Together with meat mainly from sheep and cattle, oats and barley were the main food staple, and would have needed drying after any period of storage due to the cool, damper Lewis climate. The wild resources of fish and marine shell fish were also exploited. The main fuel used on Dùn Èistean was peat, which would have been harvested from the moorland interior of Ness, as it still is today, although birch, alder, hazel, heather, larch, Scots pine and oak charcoal found suggests a general collection of wood for fuel, probably with a high component of driftwood. All fuel that was burnt had to be brought up the cliffs to the site, and so there would certainly have been expedient burning of waste, such as animal bone and cereal processing waste, and found materials such as driftwood and heather.⁷⁸

CONCLUSION

Whilst its position at the northernmost tip of the Isle of Lewis in the Western Isles of Scotland may draw the modern observer to conclude that the tidal sea stack of Dùn Èistean was

situated in a remote rural backwater, excavations on the site have uncovered archaeological evidence that in the 16th and 17th centuries it was caught up in the troubles resulting from the political turmoil experienced between the islands and the mainland governmental authorities at this time. Excavations of the remains of a defended settlement on the stack have demonstrated that it was similar to a castle in its layout, with a defensive perimeter wall, a lookout tower, communal quarters and ancillary buildings. Environmental and soils sampling of the excavated deposits have produced evidence for a series of short-lived occupations, with the construction techniques and materials used reflecting the knowledge and resources available in the local environment. The environmental assemblages from deposits across the site and through all phases are also remarkably similar, indicating that many aspects of life on the stack remained unchanged throughout the occupations, with a continued reliance on the local land and marine resources during the changing, dynamic nature of occupation on the site. However as well as this strong local identity, there are hints of exterior political influences and conflict in the artefactual assemblages, with post-excavation analyses identifying a small group of imported pottery sherds, coins and evidence for the manufacture and use of gunflints and lead artillery in and around the buildings. These assemblages indicate that the occupants of the settlement were involved in the wider picture of instability that existed in Lewis at this time. The position of Dùn Èistean within the MacLeod lordship, at the northern tip of the Western Isles and thrust out into the North Sea, located it in the busy sea routes around northern Britain and Europe. With a view north and south down the Lewis coast and across the Minch to the Scottish mainland Dùn Èistean was highly visible in a maritime world, making it ideally placed to potentially control or at least monitor passing sea traffic. The stack was therefore far from being on the edge, unaffected by the political troubles, but the excavations indicate that the inhabitants of the settlement developed a unique local response to these wider threats, maintaining the self-sufficiency of a people with a strong local identity.

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LIST OF FIGURE CAPTIONS

FIG. 1

Location map (Gillian McSwan, Glasgow University, GUARD Archaeology Ltd)

FIG. 2

View of Dùn Èistean from the south (Photo: Author).

FIG. 3

Aerial photograph, date unknown. This superb unsourced oblique aerial photograph was taken when the island was still being regularly grazed. It probably dates to the 1970s as it featured in an exhibition mounted by the Lewis and Harris Museum Society in *c.* 1980.

FIG. 4

Topographic survey of Dùn Èistean (John Arthur, Glasgow University, GUARD Archaeology Ltd).

FIG. 5

Structure G, the tower, interpretation plan (Illustration: Charlotte Francoz and Gillian McSwan, Glasgow University, GUARD Archaeology Ltd).

FIG. 6

Excavations in Structure C, the corn-drying kiln barn (Photo: Author, Glasgow University, GUARD Archaeology Ltd).

FIG. 7

Blackhouse in Baile an Truiseil, Isle of Lewis, showing batter at base of wall (Photo: Author).

FIG. 8: Photo of section through Structure G wall with soil micromorphology kubiena tins in situ (Photo: Author, Glasgow University, GUARD Archaeology Ltd).

FIG. 9

Local pottery vessels CAT 28 and 29 from Area D (see Barrowman, R. C. 2015; Illustration:

Anne-Marie O'Donnell, Glasgow University).

¹ An earlier version of this paper was first presented at 'Maritime Communities of the North Atlantic Arc: Contexts, connexions and comparisons' a seminar organised by Alison Cathcart and Aonghas MacCoinnich, Strathclyde University, 23rd May 2013.

² Cox 2006.

³ Barrowman, R. C. 2015; Barrowman, C. S. 2015.

⁴ MacCoinnich 2015; Stiùbhart 2015.

⁵ Campbell 2010, 318, cited in Barrowman, R. C. 2015.

⁶ Barrowman and Driscoll 2000.

⁷ Barrowman 2002; 2004; 2006; 2007; Barrowman *et al.* 2007; Maguire in Barrowman 2002, 11-15; Maguire in Barrowman, R. C. 2015.

⁸ As reported by Outram and Batt 2015, a Bayesian model was used, allowing the archaeological information to be combined with the chronological information through the translation of the stratigraphic order of the deposits into a statistical function (Buck *et al.* 1991; Buck *et al.* 1994). The OxCal 4.1.4 programme was selected for the analysis as it allowed chronological models to be built easily and produces clear graphical outputs that display the models imposed on the sequence through the production of probability distributions plots of the selected dates (Bronk Ramsey 1995). OxCal 4.1.4 also utilises the most recent calibration curve, IntCal09 (Reimer *et al.* 2009) to calibrate the radiocarbon dates (Bronk Ramsey 2009). All cited in Outram and Batt 2015.

⁹ Barrowman, R. C. 2015.

¹⁰ Ballin 2015; Outram and Batt 2015.

¹¹ Thomas 1878, 516.

¹² Barrowman with McHardy 2015.

¹³ Batey 2015.

¹⁴ Barrowman with Dalgligh, Barrowman and MacLeod 2015.

¹⁵ Barrowman with Becket and Maguire 2015.

¹⁶ Barrowman with Becket and Barrowman 2015.

¹⁷ Barrowman with Becket and Barrowman 2015; Barrowman with Dalgligh and Barrowman 2015.

¹⁸ Barrowman with Poller 2015.

¹⁹ Barrowman with Becket and Barrowman 2015.

²⁰ Masson-McLean 2015; Ramsay 2015a; McKenna and Simpson 2015.

²¹ Ramsay 2015b.

²² Barrowman with Dalgligh and Barrowman 2015.

²³ See Mackie 2013, 11-13, 17. 24-5.

²⁴ See Barrowman and Driscoll 2000.

²⁵ Barrowman with Becket and Barrowman 2015.

²⁶ Will 2015.

²⁷ Murdoch 2015; Will 2015.

²⁸ Shaw 1980, 91.

²⁹ See further discussion in Barrowman, R. C. 2015.

³⁰ OS Name Book 3A.

³¹ Thomas 1878, 516.

³² MacLean and MacLeod 1989, 117.

³³ Stiùbhart 2015; Robson 2004, 17-34.

³⁴ See Robson 2004 17-45, particularly 18, 36 and Appendix, 53-58; MacPhail's sketch of the tower on Dùn Èistean is reproduced in Barrowman, R. C. 2015.

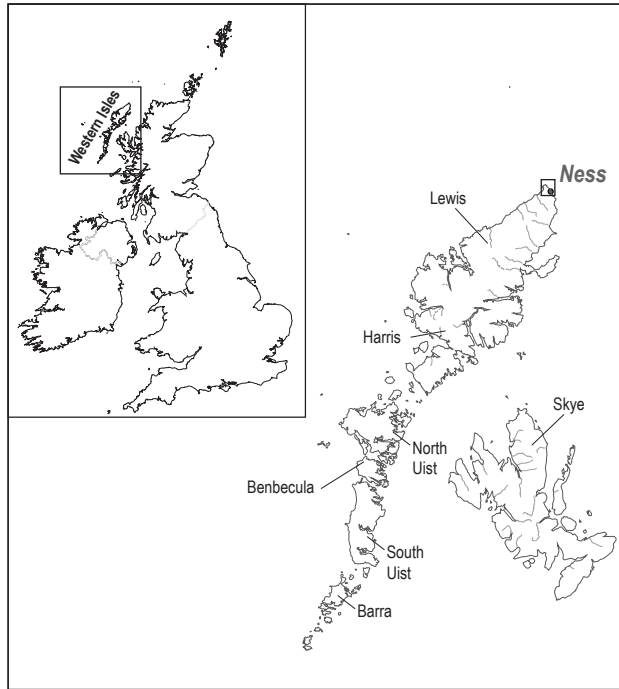
³⁵ Thomas 1890; 1878.

³⁶ Thomas 1878, 516.

³⁷ Beatty 1992; MacGeoch *et al.* 2010.

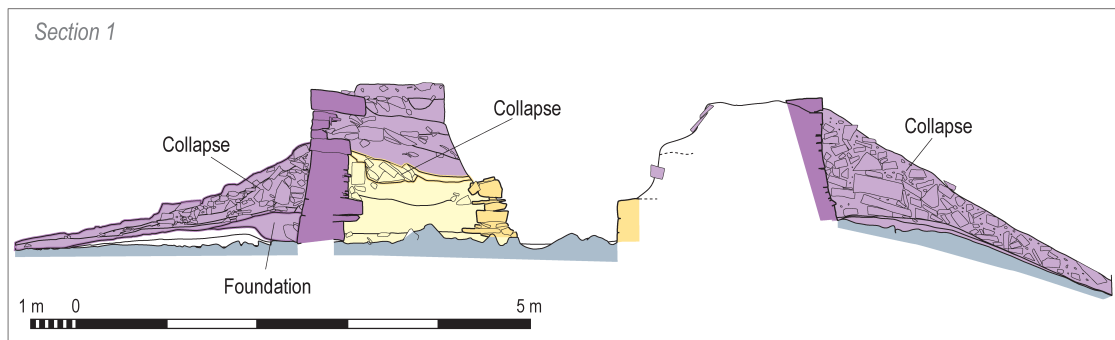
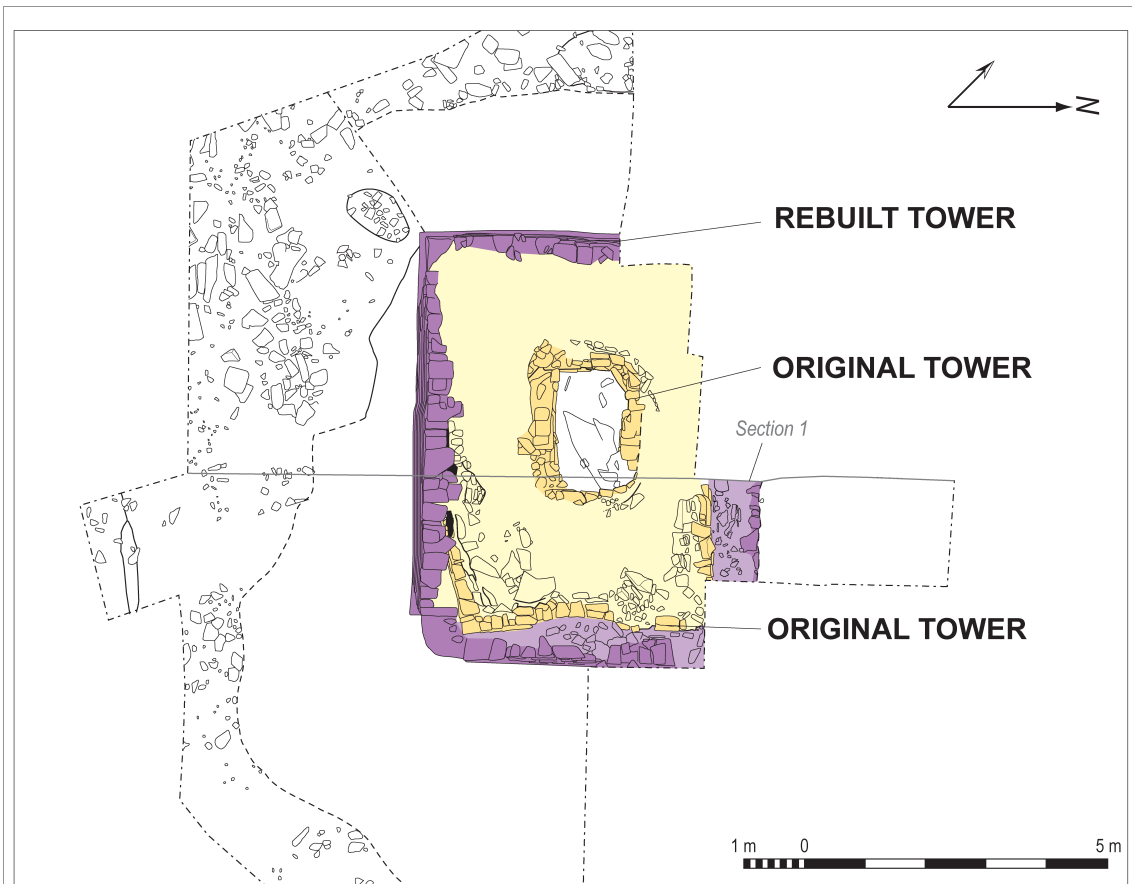
³⁸ Thomas 1878, 541. This is now published: *The Morrison Manuscript: Traditions of the Western Isles, 1975*, Stornoway, Isle of Lewis: National Society Daughters of Founders and Patriots of America, Edited by Norman Macdonald.

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- ³⁹ Discussed by MacCoinnich 2015.
⁴⁰ MacCoinnich 2015; Stiùbhart 2015.
⁴¹ Stiùbhart 2006a; 2015.
⁴² MacCoinnich 2004; forthcoming.
⁴³ MacCoinnich 2015.
⁴⁴ McKenna and Simpson 2015; McKenzie 2015.
⁴⁵ Outram and Batt 2015.
⁴⁶ McKenna and Simpson 2015; McKenzie 2015.
⁴⁷ Ballin 2012; 2015.
⁴⁸ Ferguson 2015.
⁴⁹ see MacCoinnich 2015; forthcoming.
⁵⁰ See Barrowman, C. S. 2015.
⁵¹ Stiùbhart 2006a, 3; 2015.
⁵² Barrowman, C. S. 2015; Poller 2015a.
⁵³ Poller 2015b.
⁵⁴ Stiùbhart 2006b; 2015; Barrowman, C. S. 2015; 2007, 25.
⁵⁵ See Barrowman 2008.
⁵⁶ FitzPatrick 2010.
⁵⁷ Caldwell 1991; 1992; 1993; 1994; 1997; 2010; Caldwell and Ewart 1993; Dodgshon 2002, 9-10; 18-19; Miket and Roberts 1990.
⁵⁸ See Raven 2005, 336-361; Barrowman, R. C. 2015 and references therein for discussion of these sites.
⁵⁹ See Raven 2005, 346-7.
⁶⁰ Stiùbhart 2006b; 2015.
⁶¹ Barber 1981
⁶² Barber 1981, 532.
⁶³ Miket and Roberts 1990, 32-37.
⁶⁴ Breen 2004, 423
⁶⁵ Naessens 2007, 226; 235; and references therein.
⁶⁶ Will 2015.
⁶⁷ Stevenson 1952; Bateson 2015.
⁶⁸ Barrowman *et al.* 2004; Barrowman and McHardy 2005; McHardy *et al* 2009; Barrowman, R. C. 2015.
⁶⁹ Hothershall pers comm; Knott pers comm.
⁷⁰ e.g. Miket and Roberts 1990, 7-8; Armit 1996, 217-8.
⁷¹ Raven 2005, 348-9.
⁷² Lamb 1973, 81; cited in Barrowman 2015
⁷³ McKenna and Simpson 2015; McKenzie 2015.
⁷⁴ NicAoidh 2000; Mackie 2006a; 2006b.
⁷⁵ Sneddon 2015.
⁷⁶ Campbell 2015.
⁷⁷ Ramsay 2015a.
⁷⁸ See Masson-MacLean 2015; Ramsay 2015a; 2015b; Cerón-Carrasco 2015.















Key

- | | | | | | |
|---|---------|---|--------------------------------|---|------------------------------|
|  | Bedrock |  | Stone facing of rebuilt tower |  | Turf walls of original tower |
|  | Void |  | Stone facing of original tower |  | Turf wall of rebuilt tower |

Trench G







DEAP '07
▲ K13
G063
JFM 23-7-07

DEAP '07
▲ K12
G059
JFM 23-7-07

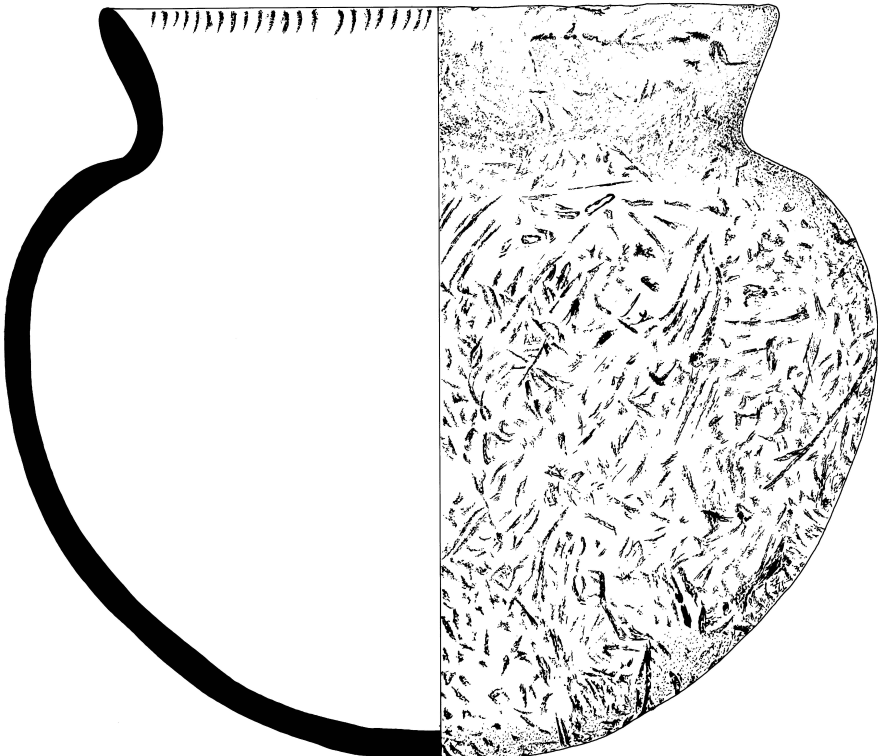
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▲ K11
G060 /
G061
23-7-07 JFM

DEAP '07
▲ K10
G067
JFM 23-7-07

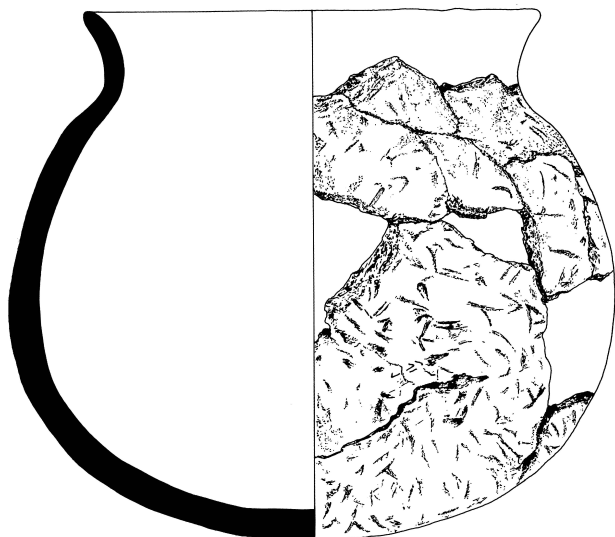
DEAP '07
▲ K9
G061
JFM 23-7-07

DEAP '07
▲ K8
G066
JFM 23-7-07

DEAP '07
▲ K7
G068 /
G069
23-07-07 JFM



C No 28



C No 29

0

5 cm