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The Archaeology of Finlaggan, Islay

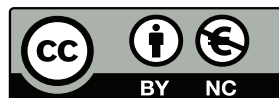
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ISBN: 978-1-908332-36-3 (hardback) • 978-1-908332-35-6 (PDF)

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Caldwell, D H 2025 *The Archaeology of Finlaggan, Islay: Excavations at the centre of the Lordship of the Isles, 1989–1998*. Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.
<https://doi.org/10.9750/978190833256>

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Illustration 13.1
Eilean na Comhairle from Eilean Mór

Chapter 13

EILEAN NA COMHAIRLE EXCAVATIONS

Introduction

Four trenches (16, 16E, 23, 24) were excavated on Eilean na Comhairle in 1993 and 1994 (Illus 13.1, 13.2). Many of the features and contexts encountered manifestly extended from one trench to another, and it therefore seems appropriate to describe the results of all this together. In 1994 limited reconnaissance work by the Scottish Trust for Underwater Archaeology demonstrated the presence of medieval midden deposits on the side of Eilean na Comhairle adjacent to Eilean Mór. In 1997 it was possible to sample these, thanks to the cooperation of the Army, particularly the Edinburgh University Officers' Training Corps, in building a dam and pumping out the water (Illus 13.37). This work was labelled trench 25 and is described separately.

Trenches 16, 16E, 23 and 24 (Illus 13.3–36, Tables 13.1–3)

Our plan in laying out trench 16 in 1993 was to find an explanation for buildings (a) and (b) and to demonstrate whether they lay over earlier structures. As excavation progressed, traces of the stone-walled castle were encountered, which occasioned changes in strategy.

Trench 16 was at first quadrilateral in shape with sides 8.5m, 10m, 6m and 8.5m in length (Illus 13.2, 13.3). It was positioned to take in the east half of building (a) as far its doorway, part of the supposed, adjacent yard, and the south portion of building (b). A smaller area was added on the east side to expose more of the castle wall, and in 1994 some of the trench was again opened up and extended to form an excavation about 2 by 6m, positioned to cross the east wall of the castle [16025] (Illus 13.17).

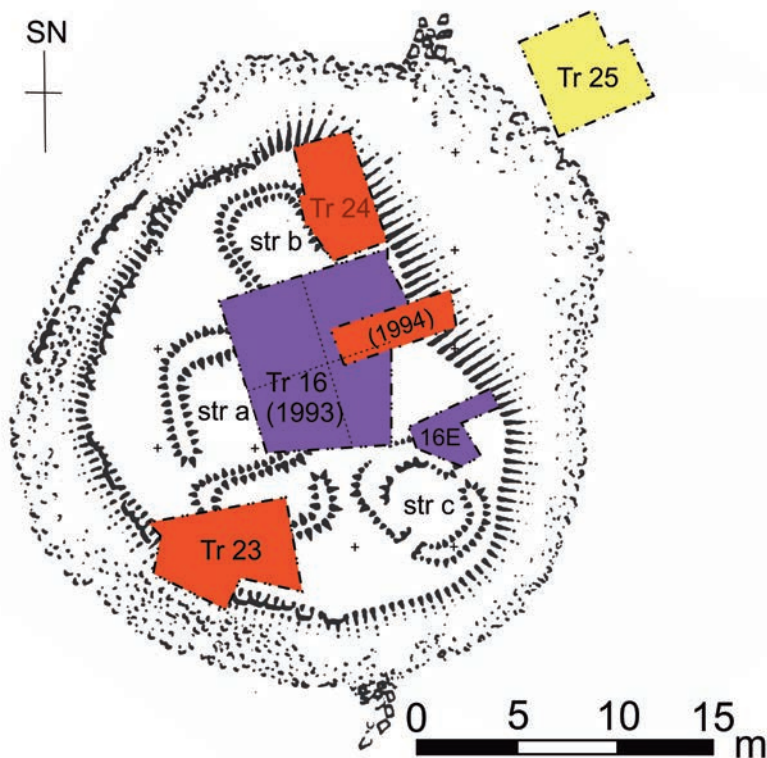


Illustration 13.2
Eilean na Comhairle, layout of trenches

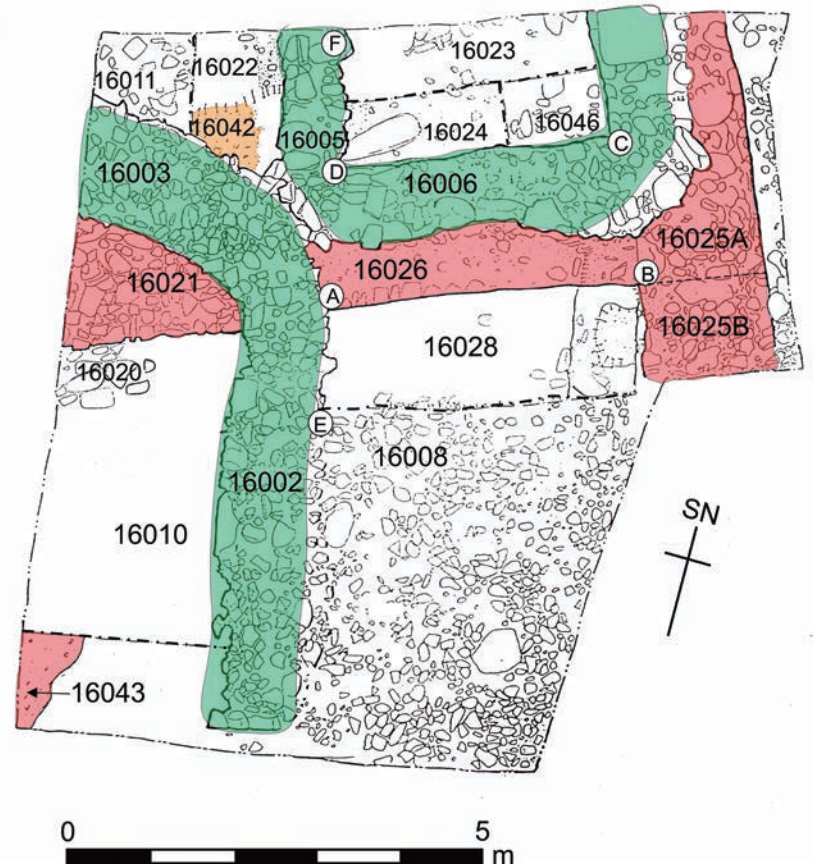


Illustration 13.3
Trench 16 (1993), main structures



Illustration 13.4
Trench 16 (1993), structure (a), courtyard beyond

Trench 16E (Illus 13.13) was dug in 1993 to increase our knowledge of the castle. It was irregular in shape, with an area of about 8 sq m, and lay to the south-east of trench 16, immediately adjacent to the north-east corner of building (c).

Trenches 23 and 24 were both laid out in 1994 in the hope of defining the south and north extent of the castle. Trench 23 had an area of about 28 sq m and took in the south-west corner of structure (a) (Illus 13.22). While excavation in this area produced useful information on building (a) and the much earlier dun, the aim of improving our knowledge of the castle was largely frustrated by the discovery that its ruins had been eroded out of this edge of the island. Trench 24 covered the north-east corner of structure (b) and was about 6 by 3.6m (Illus 13.29).

Building (a) (Illus 13.4–7, 13.19, 13.20)

Building (a) is rectangular with an overall size of 10.8 by 6.7m and rounded corners, giving it an outline similar to a playing card. One entrance was excavated in its east wall, and it is clear from surface indications that it is matched by another opposite it in its west wall, some stones of which were found to break through the turf when this area of the island was scythed. Building (a) is centrally placed on the flat summit of the island, broadside on to the supposed approach from the causeway connecting with Eilean Mór. On removal of the turf in trench 16, within the building, a Victorian or early 20th-century bottle (SF 16102) was found containing a document. Unfortunately the bottle had already been broken and the ink on the paper had smudged beyond any hope of decipherment. A wooden rod had been inserted in the bottle's

mouth, probably with the intention that it would project upwards from the ground surface.

Other evidence of relatively recent activity about building (a) was soon evident. The apparent cross-wall planned by the Royal Commission, creating two rooms in the interior, turned out to be a low bank [16010, 16019] of redeposited gravelly soil, created by recent digging into an old ground surface and removal of tumble. An occupation deposit [16017] partially survived this episode. A small portion of the interior of house (a) was also excavated in trench 23. There, there was no evidence for recent disturbance and a topsoil containing tumble from the walls [23006] was found to have developed over a dark brown occupation layer [23009], the equivalent of 16017, containing many small fragments of bone. A sherd of reduced gritty ware and pieces of ironwork from 16010, including two knives (F74 and F75) and a mail ring (SF 16029), were probably churned up from the underlying occupation deposit which also contained medieval wheel-made pottery. Two other iron objects (F104 and F105), also from 16010, are identified as pot handles, possibly relating to 19th-century activity.

The walls of building (a) [16002, 16003, 23003] are reduced uniformly to a height of about half a metre above the present ground surface around and inside the building, and although some tumble [23006], as already noted, lies adjacent to the interior of the south wall, the overall impression is of a neatly manicured ruin, tastefully laid out (Illus 13.4, 13.5). A pile of large blocks and boulders wedged between the adjacent corners of buildings (a) and (b) escaped the tidying-up process that created this phenomenon.

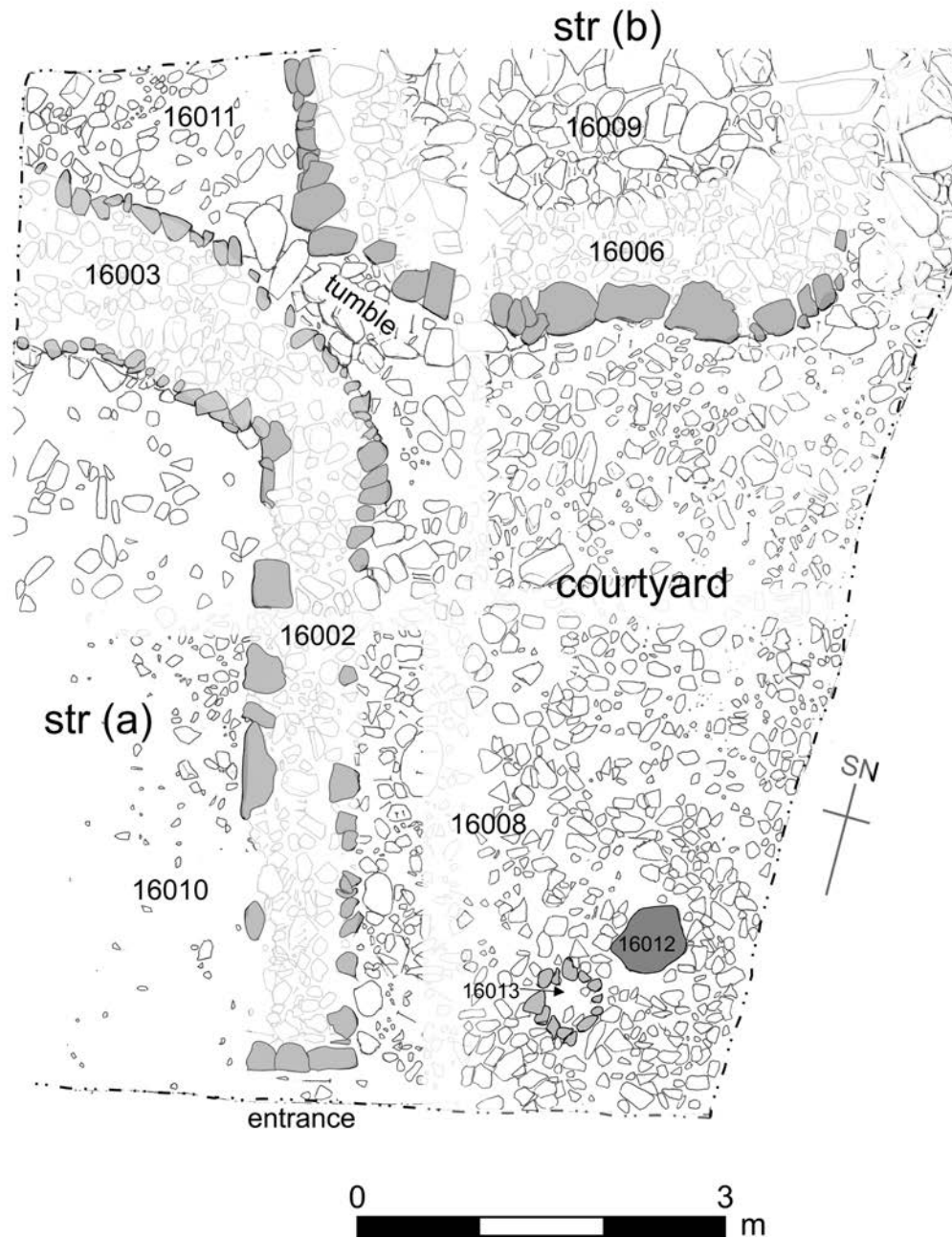


Illustration 13.5

Trench 16 (1993), plan with structure (a) and metalled surface [16008] in the courtyard

The walls of building (a) vary in width from about 1.4 to 1.6m. Two internal corners were excavated, at the north-east and the south-west. They appear to have been built as right angles but then had rubble wedged in place to give a more rounded shape, corresponding to the external angles. It is not clear whether this was a medieval adaption or, perhaps more likely, the result of more recent restoration. The stonework around the entrance may also be of recent date, perhaps deemed necessary to tidy up the space created by the robbing of dressings, which could be expected to be of sandstone.

The actual original wall faces of building (a) stand no more

than one course high, but the presence of substantial, well-spaced, quarry-dressed blocks forming the faces, with smaller rubble material forming the wall cores, suggests masonry characterised by Caldwell and Ruckley (2005: 102–03) as type 3 – coursed boulders and blocks with panels of pinnings. It is a type that was ubiquitous in medieval times in the West Highlands and Islands. The stone present in building (a) is mostly local quartzite and limestone with occasional use of phyllite, dolerite and glacial erratics. It appears to have been held in a poor-quality lime mortar that has all but disintegrated, leaving spreads of sand and gravel.



Illustration 13.6

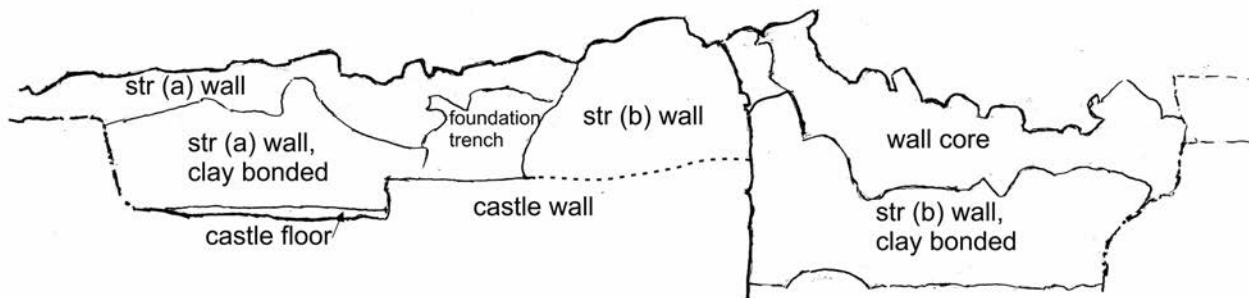
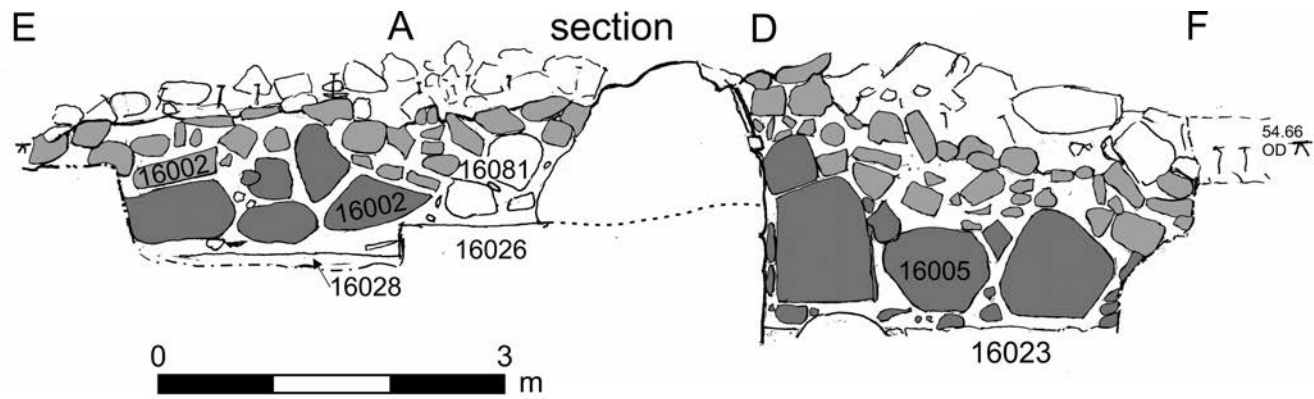
Trench 16 (1993). The 1m ranging rod lies on the mortar floor of the castle, with the wall of structure (a) beyond. The 2m rod rests on the reduced remains of the interior east/west castle wall [16026]. To its right is the south wall of structure (b)

A sondage against the exterior of the east wall shows that it has a substantial foundation of clay-bonded boulders, about 0.3 to 0.4m in depth (Illus 13.6, 13.7). This was laid over the mortar floor [16028] of the ruined castle. The south wall [23003] also appears to be founded on clay-bonded boulders laid over the castle floor [23017] (Illus 13.26). The north wall sits partially atop the flattened, level remains of a castle wall [16021] (Illus 13.3).

In trench 23 a short section was excavated of a cobbled path [23007] (Illus 13.19, 13.20), possibly extending along the west side of building (a). A bone playing-piece (SF 23029) was got from it. A wall [23004] extends from the south-west corner of structure (a) towards the edge of the island, about 0.7m wide and now only a single course in height. Its faces consist of limestone and quartzite boulders, with other pieces of similar rock forming its core. To both sides of it tumble and loose stones [23005, 23027] have slid down the eroded side of the island (Illus 13.20, 13.21). Also, in trench 23 it was observed that the house (a) floor [23009] lay on a ground surface [23011] traceable outside the building as 23023,

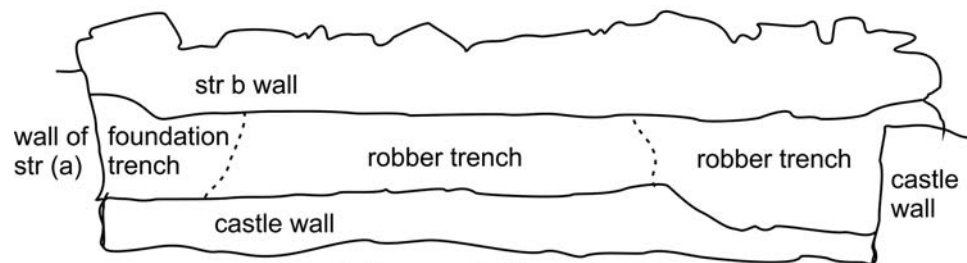
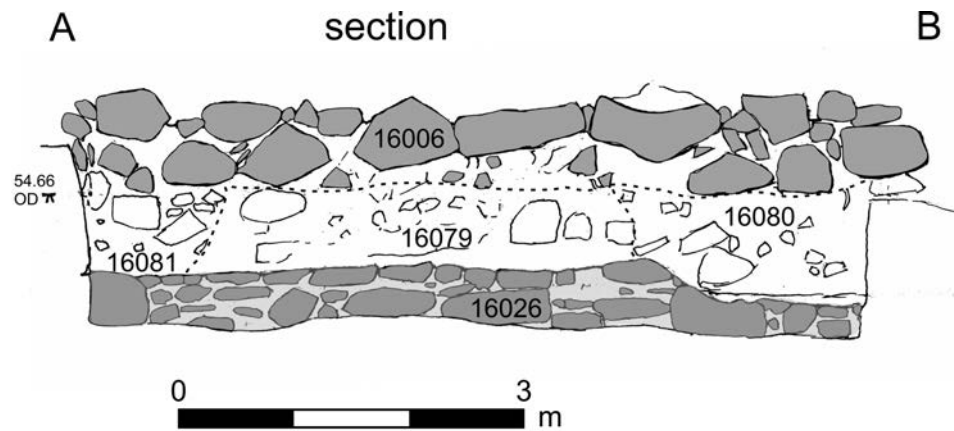
capping midden deposits [23024, 23039, 23012] consisting of tips of peat ash that had accumulated after the destruction of the castle.

To the east of house (a) is an open, level area extending over much of the summit of the island, designated by us as the courtyard (Illus 13.5). As with the present form of building (a), it seems to be the result of considerable, relatively recent modelling. It has a crude, metallised surface [16008], formed from an even spread of smallish stones, from 50 to 150mm across, in a matrix of earth. Sitting on the surface of 16008 there was one large rectangular quartzite boulder, about 500 by 580 by 310mm high [16012]. There was no trace of any working on it or shaping by human hand. It was positioned about 2m from the wall of structure (a). Nearby was a post-setting (unexcavated) with a diameter of about 0.4m [16013]. The metallising 16008 lies over an earlier ground surface [16015] which seals another rubble spread [16016] resulting from the destruction of buildings (a) and (b).



interpretation

Illustration 13.7
Trench 16 (1993), section E-F



interpretation

Illustration 13.8
Trench 16 (1993), section A-B



Illustration 13.9
Trench 16 (1993), interior of structure (b) with buttress 16014



Illustration 13.10
Trench 16 (1993), interior of structure (b) cleaned down to the surface of 16023

Building (b) (Illus 13.5–11, 13.28–30)

Building (b) was partially exposed in trenches 16 and 24 (Illus 13.2). Prior to excavation it appeared as a rectangular house with rounded corners, not quite on the same orientation as structure (a). Its south-west corner is adjacent to the north-east corner of (a), with a gap too small for anyone to pass conveniently between the two. It is about 4.8 by 7.5m overall, with an entrance in its east wall.

As with building (a), its walls appeared uniformly reduced, possibly as a result of the 19th-century clearance work described for structure (a) and the courtyard. Excavation revealed that its walls, from about 0.75 to 0.95m in thickness, were constructed of boulders and blocks of local stones set in a poor-quality lime mortar, the larger ones forming the faces, with smaller material in the core. They did not appear to be of the same type 3 construction as house (a). There was no clear indication which of these two structures was of earlier date, but perhaps, in any case, they were basically contemporary. The south wall [16006] (Illus 13.8), the east wall [24003] (Illus 13.33) and the north wall [24004] were all founded on earlier castle walls. The west wall [16005], like the east wall of house (a), had a substantial foundation of clay-bonded boulders (Illus 13.7, 13.10, 13.11). The south-east corner appears to have been built reusing castle stonework after the original castle wall had been robbed out (Illus 13.35, 13.36).

In the interior of building (b) there was an earth floor [16024, 24012] lying over debris and the mortar floor of the ruined castle [16045, 24019] (Illus 13.34). It was some 80mm thick and had a trampled, gritty surface. Over it, after building (b) had fallen out of use, a peaty soil [16023, 24007] had developed, and over that

there was a considerable depth of rubble [16009, 24006]. Some of it was deliberately and carefully positioned to form a buttress for the south-west corner [16014] (Illus 13.9). This would seem to indicate that the interior remained open for a space of time and there was a fear of some of the walling collapsing. The whole interior space, however, was filled to a considerable depth with rubble [16009], either resulting from the collapse of the walls near the time the building fell out of use or, perhaps, largely consisting of tumble dumped here as part of the later tidying-up operations.

In the north-west corner of this trench a small area bounded by buildings (a) and (b) was excavated (Illus 13.3). Nineteenth-century clearance work was represented by a layer of debris [16011] lying on dark brown soil [16022], an earlier ground surface, probably equivalent to 23023. Under 16022 was burnt, dumped material [16042], including an iron nail (SF 16075), equivalent to the post-castle peat ash tips [23024, etc] encountered in trench 23.

Building (c)

A small portion of the exterior wall of building (c) [16038] was just clipped in trench 16E, but not enough to say anything meaningful about it (Illus 13.13). On the basis of surface traces (Illus 6.21) this structure, about 10 by 12.5m overall, was rectangular, with rounded corners and opposed entrances in its long sides. It may be presumed to have been in use at the same time as houses (a) and (b). It truncates an earlier castle wall [16025B].

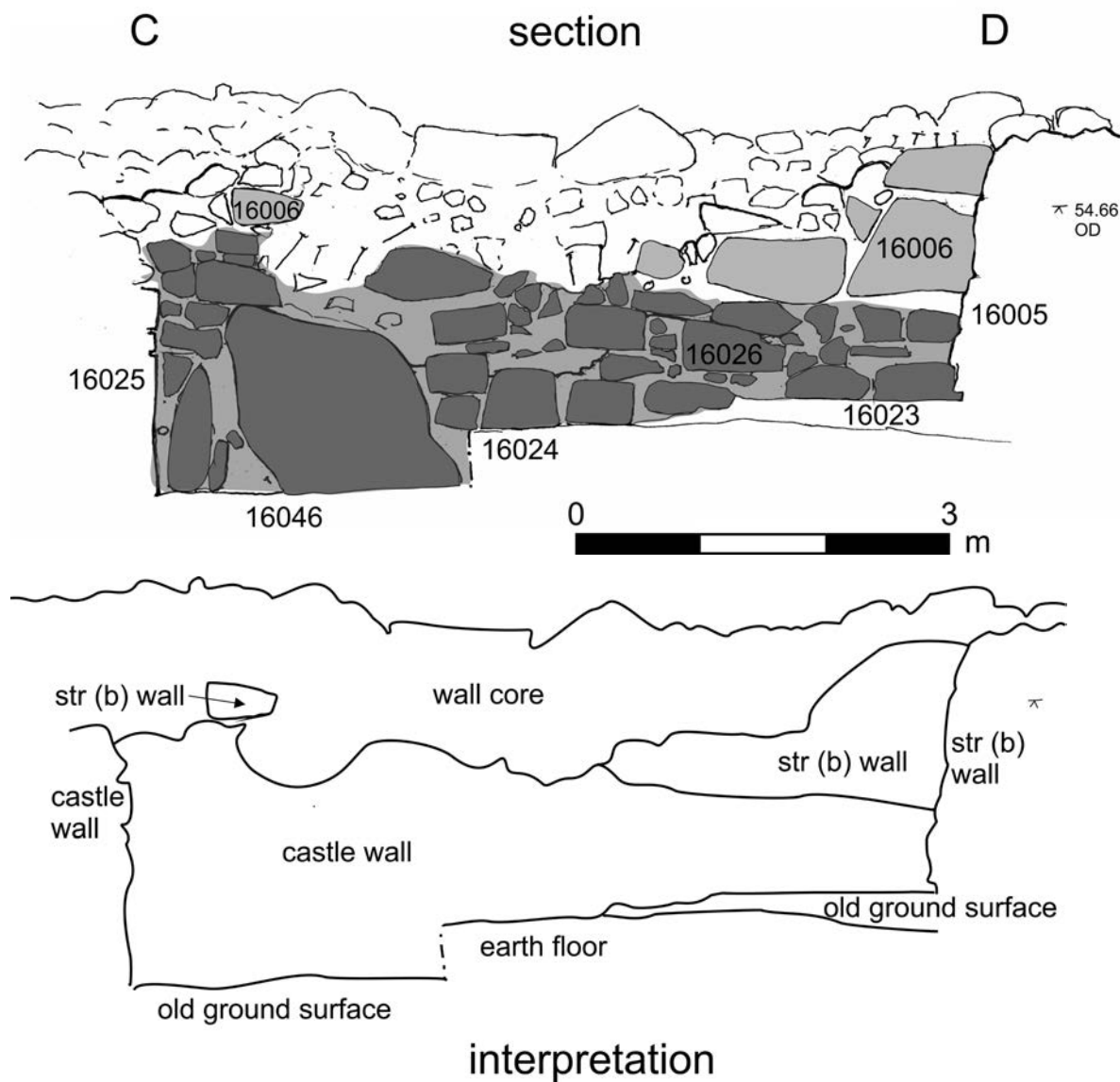


Illustration 13.11
Trench 16 (1993), section C-D



Illustration 13.12
Trench 16E, castle wall

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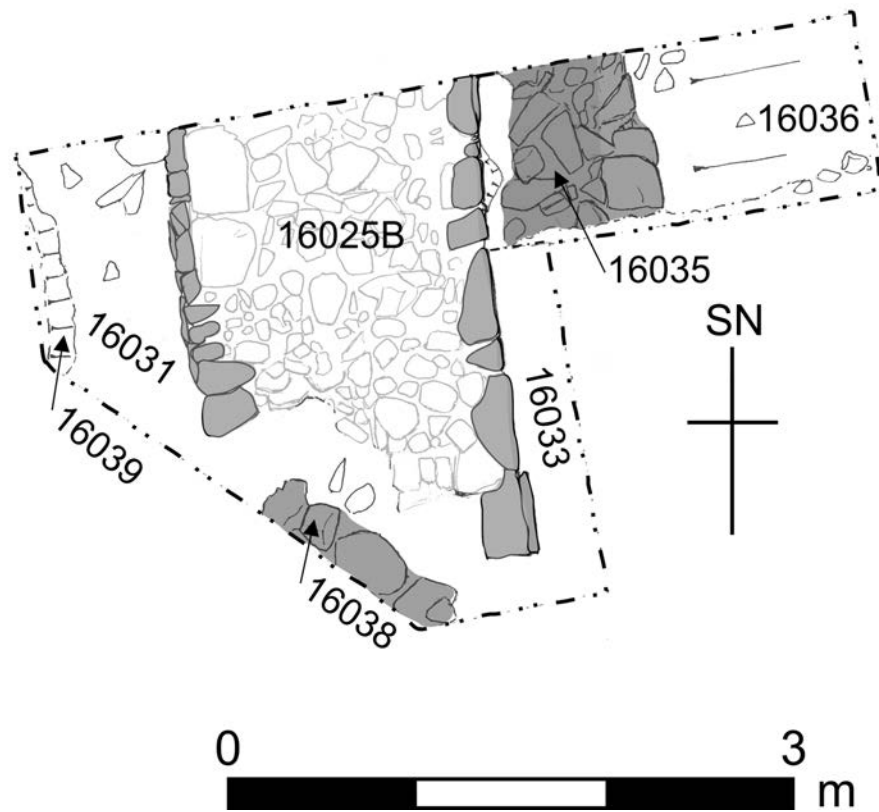


Illustration 13.13
Trench 16E, plan

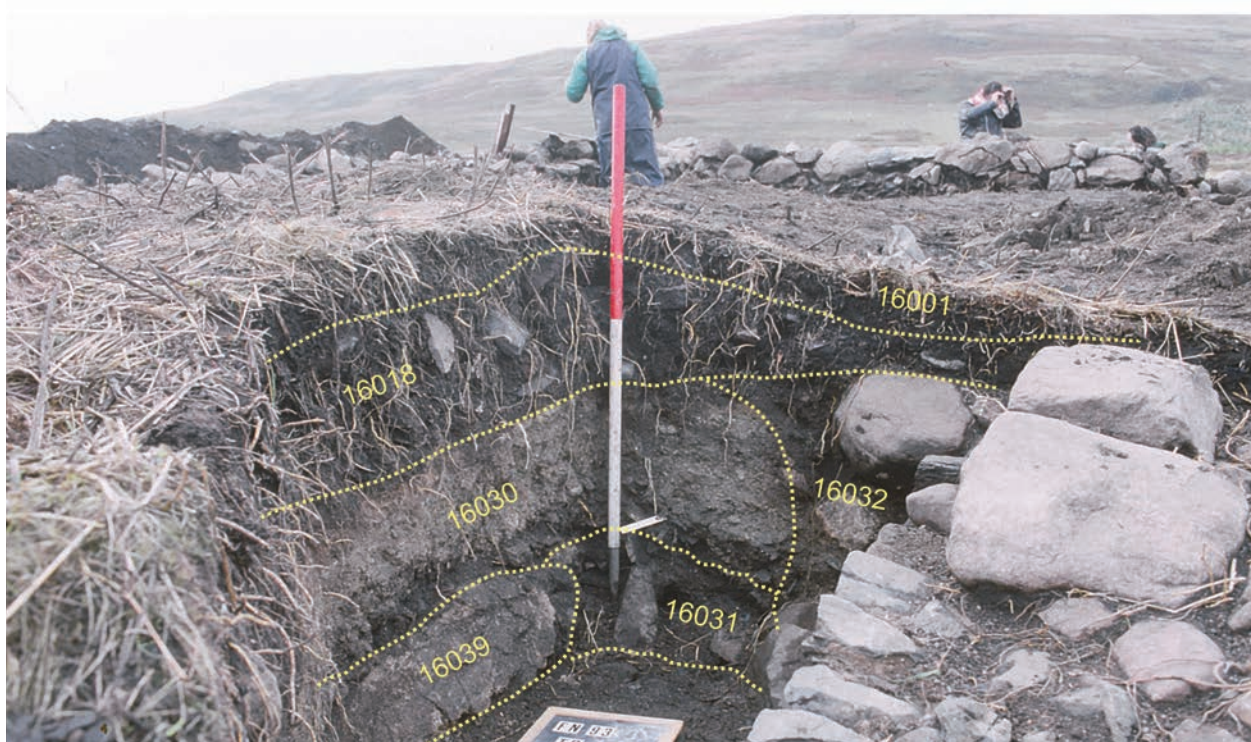


Illustration 13.14
Trench 16E, castle wall to the right. 16018 levelling; 16030 castle floor; 16031 fill of foundation trench for castle wall; 16032 drain (?); 16039 edge of foundation trench

EILEAN NA COMHAIRLE EXCAVATIONS



Illustration 13.15
Trench 16 (1994), looking east with castle floor in foreground



Illustration 13.16
Trench 16 (1994), looking west over plinth 16062 and castle wall 16025B. A fragment of red sandstone marks the side of the much denuded castle entrance. To the right the straight join between wall 16025B and 16025A is visible

The castle (Illus 6.22, 13.3, 13.6, 13.8, 13.12–18, 13.22, 13.26, 13.30, 13.36)

The remains of the castle are characterised by massive masonry walls, reduced for the most part to foundation level and with their surviving faces subsequently robbed for building stone (Illus 13.15, 13.16). The stonework is cemented by lime mortar, its mix including rounded gravel-size quartzite pebbles, probably from the loch-side, and pieces of limpets and other shells. The faces were of a type characterised by Caldwell and Ruckley (2005: 100–01) as type 1, that is, of coursed work, mostly with long, low rectangular blocks of local stone, including phyllite and quartzite, roughly dressed (Illus 13.8). They are typically 800mm long by 300mm high or smaller. The core of the walls has more of a mix of blocks, much of it limestone, and boulders held together by liberal quantities of lime mortar.

The east-facing wall [16025], partially excavated in trenches 16 and 16E, was clearly built in two segments with a straight joint (Illus 13.16). That portion to the north has been labelled as 16025A and the rest to the south as 16025B. In terms of construction, they appear identical, with a width of about 1.8m. Limited excavation of their east faces in trench 16 in 1994 shows that they were founded on an old ground surface [16068], which was then built up with a series of bands of sandy gritty soil containing fragments of phyllite [16065] (Illus 13.18). This acted as a base for a separately constructed clay and stone revetment or plinth, about 0.7 to 1.1m wide and surviving up to 0.8m high [16062], running along the exterior of the castle wall (Illus 13.16, 13.17). It was also observed as 16035 in trench 16E and in trench 24 as 24022 (Illus 13.13, 13.30). On

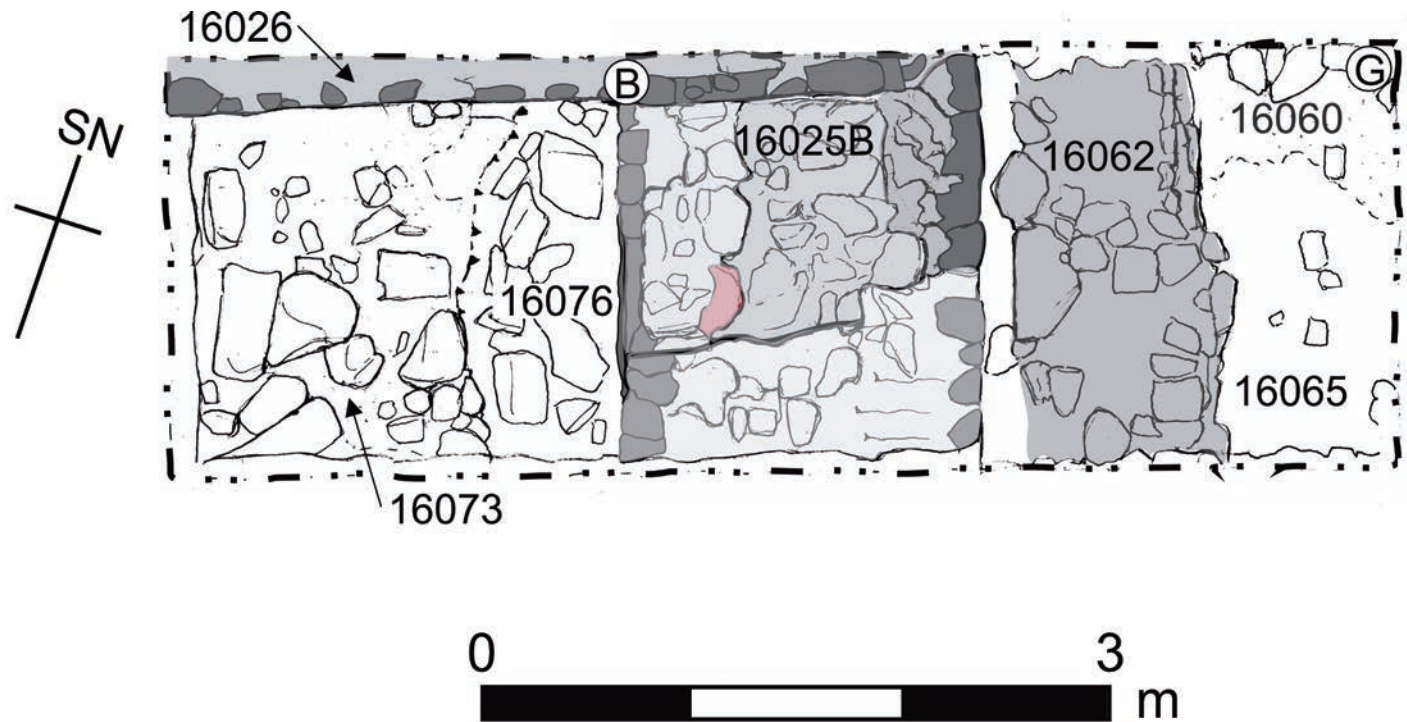


Illustration 13.17
Trench 16 (1994), plan

the west or interior side of wall 16025B a foundation trench, filled to an unknown depth with mixed soil and stone fragments [16031, 16076], was located in trench 16 and 16E, about 0.8m wide from its edge [16039, 16075] to the wall face (Illus 13.13, 13.14, 13.17). The ground [16074] on the interior (west) side of wall 16025B had been levelled up with a dump of large blocks and boulders [16073].

One side of the much robbed and denuded cobbled entrance to the castle through wall 16025B was also exposed within trench 16, indicating that this doorway was lined up with the causeway from Eilean Mór. It was splayed, being wider to the exterior, and dressed with red sandstone, a small fragment of which remained in situ (Illus 13.16, 13.17). The adjacent surface of the exterior revetment showed wear from serving as a step.

Wall 16025A continues northwards on the same alignment as 16025B, supporting the east wall of building (b) before turning

through 90° to form a north wall near the edge of the island. None of the actual castle north wall was located in trench 24, only a trench [24028] where it had been robbed out. An east-west wall [16026] of similar appearance to 16025A abuts the west face of the latter and continues at right angles, with a straight joint, supporting for some of its length the south wall of building (b) and continuing westwards under the north wall of building (a) as 16021 (Illus 13.3, 13.6).

In trench 23 the position of the castle's south wall was also represented by a robber trench [23047] (Illus 13.26). No evidence was found for a west wall to this castle, but we suspect that the structure would have been square, or near square, about 19 by 19m overall (excluding a plinth), and the line of its west wall lies in what is now loch water. Erosion and destruction have removed much of the evidence that might have been expected for the

EILEAN NA COMHAIRLE EXCAVATIONS

Context	Description	Interpretation	Equivalent to
16001	Turf and topsoil	Turf and topsoil	
16002	Blocks and slabs	East wall of (a)	
16003	Blocks and slabs	North wall of (a)	
16005	Blocks and slabs	West wall of (b)	
16006	Blocks and slabs	South wall of (b)	
16008	Mixed soil and stones	19th c? metal surface in courtyard	
16009	Large boulders in (b)	Dump	
16010	Gravel-rich soil	19th c? clearance in south of (a)	
16011	Mixed soil and stones	Debris north of (a), west of (b)	
16012	Boulder	Placed on surface of 16008	
16013	Stones and soil	Post-setting? within 16008	
16014	Boulders, clay bonded	Revetment in south-west of (b)	
16015	Peaty soil	Pre-19th c? turf in courtyard	
16016	Mixed rubble and soil	Demolition debris in courtyard	
16017	Gravel layer	Remnants of occupation in north (a)	23009
16018	Thick deposit, soil, clay, rocks	Levelling up in courtyard	
16019	Dark brown soil	19th c? redeposited in (a)	
16020	Boulders and slabs, pitched	Tumble from 16021	
16021	Slabs and blocks	East/west castle wall	
16022	Dark brown soil	Old ground surface north of (a), west of (b)	23023
16023	Peaty soil	Old ground surface in (b)	24007
16024	Gravel and soil layer	Floor of (b)	24012
16025	Lime-mortared wall	North/south castle wall, east of courtyard	
16026	Lime-mortared wall	East/west internal castle wall	
16028	Trampled mortar layer	Castle floor	
16030	Trampled mortar layer, 16E	Castle floor	16028
16031	Mixed soil and stone fragments, 16E	Fill of 16039	
16032	Mixed stone and soil fragments, 16E	Drain?	
16033	Mixed soil, gravel, stones, 16E	Build-up east of wall 16052	
16035	Boulders, clay, 16E	Castle plinth	
16036	Dark brown soil, 16E	Build-up against 16035	
16038	Boulders and slabs, 16E	Wall of (c)	
16039	Cut	Foundation trench for 16025	
16042	Burnt deposit, red/black/brown	Peat ash dump, north of (a), west of (b)	
16043	Burnt clay patch	Hearth or burning on castle floor	
16045	Mortar debris, sandstone block	Castle demolition	
16046	Black soil	Old ground surface under (b)	
16060	Stone fragments and soil	Demolition tip to east of wall 16025	
16061	Mortar and sand	Demolition tip from 16025	
16062	Clay-bonded stonework	Castle plinth	16035
16063	Silty sand	Old ground surface	
16065	Pieces of phyllite, 30% sand, silt	Make-up for 16062	
16066	Sand and mortar layers	Castle floor	
16068	Soil	Old ground surface	
16070	50% phyllite fragments, 50% sand	Pre-castle medieval	
16072	Massive rounded boulder	Foundation of wall 16025	
16073	Flat stones and black soil	Levelling up of 16074	
16074	Black soil	Old ground surface	
16075	Cut	Foundation trench, wall 16025	
16076	Phyllite chips, mortar, silt, soil	Fill of trench 16075	
16077	Rubble, sandy silt	Pre-castle deposit	
16079	Mortar, rocks, sand	Fill of robber trench	
16080	Mortar, rocks, sand	Fill of robber trench	
16081	Stone fragments and soil	Fill of foundation trench for wall 16002	

Table 13.1
Trench 16 contexts

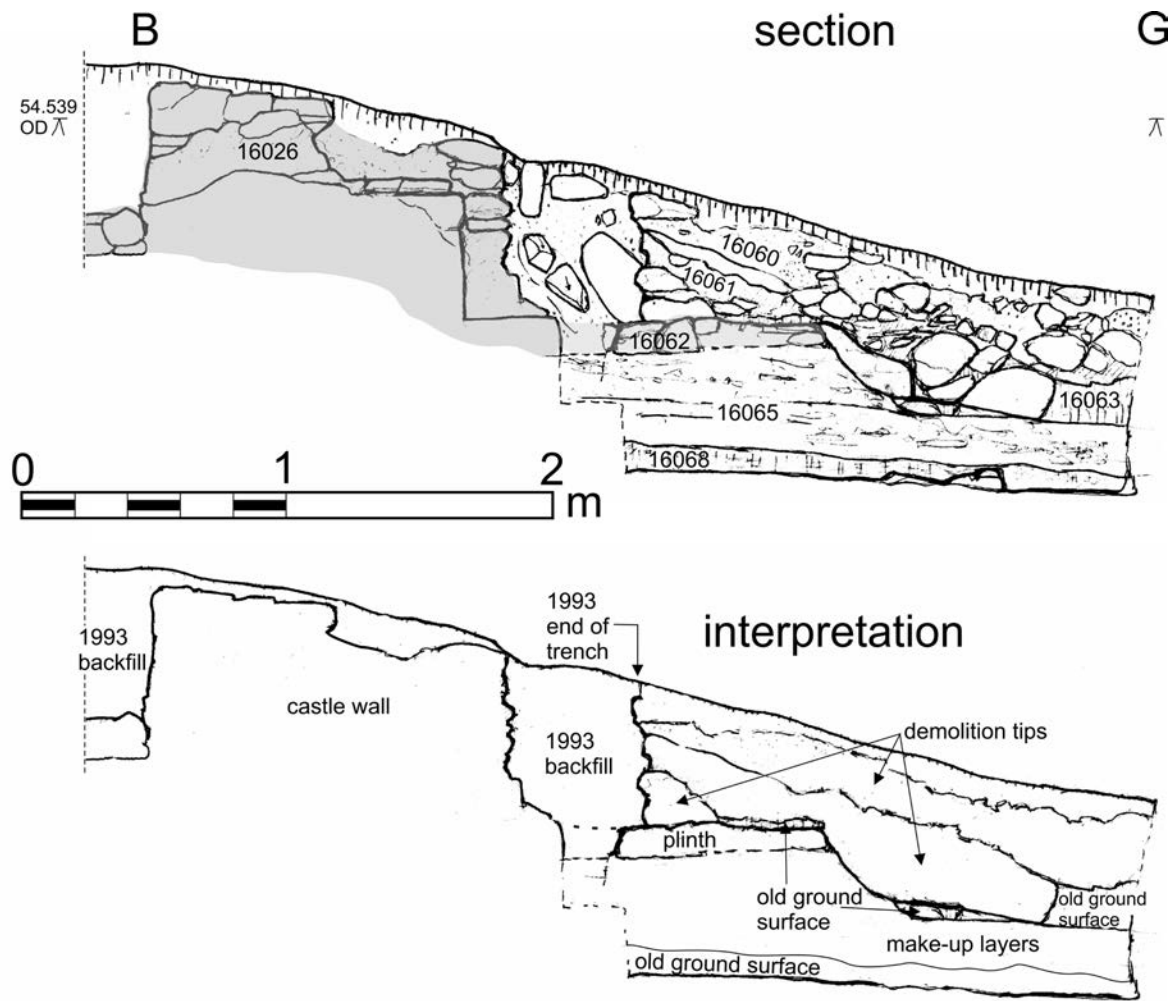


Illustration 13.18
Trench 16 (1994), section B-G



Illustration 13.19
Trench 23, looking south-east. The ranging rod to the left marks the walls of house (a); the rod to the right, wall 23004

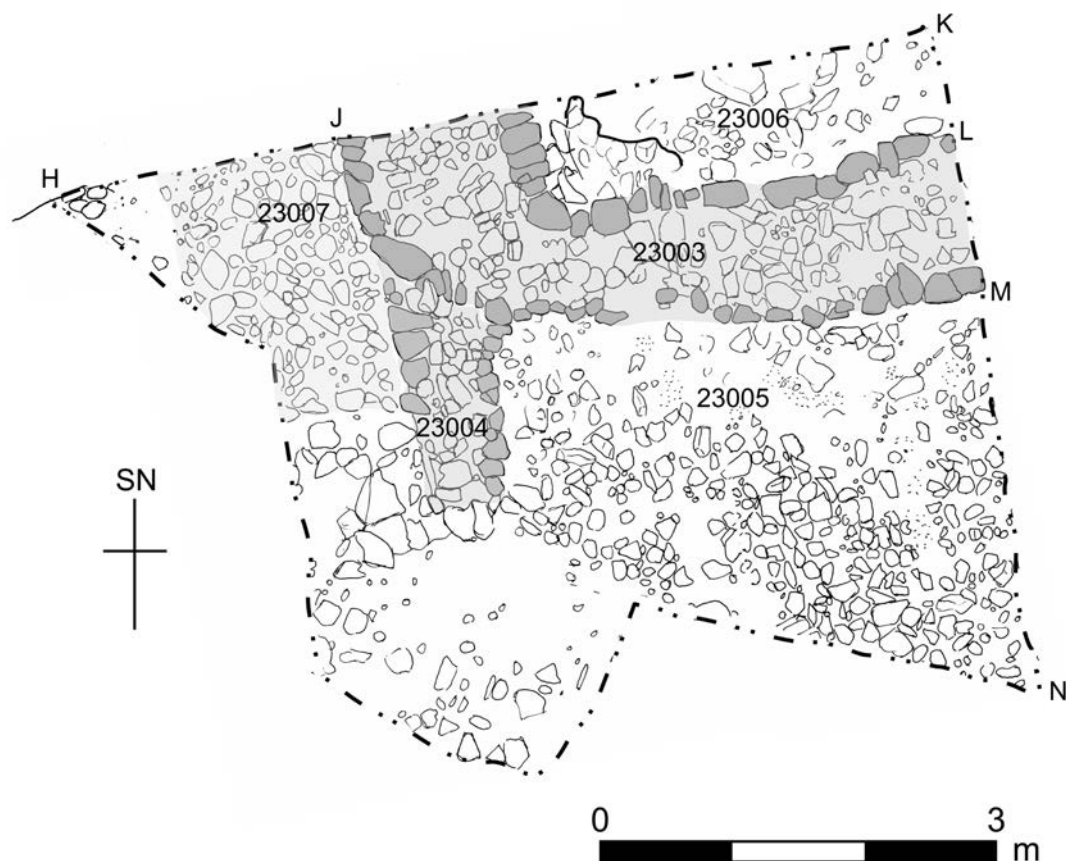


Illustration 13.20
Trench 23, plan with house (a)

south-west of the castle in trench 23. The tenuous remains of the castle floor [23017] were found to have been laid down over a make-up layer [23018], 200mm and more thick, of mixed soil and midden, itself piled over a ground surface [23033] masking earlier ruins (Illus 13.26).

The only other architectural feature relating to these castle remains which should be noted is a broken white sandstone rybat with slots for hinges or other fittings (R28), recovered from debris [16045] from the castle's destruction, sealed under the floor of building (b). Pieces of iron slag from Eilean na Comhairle are listed in Table C5.1 in the Catalogue, at least some of which may relate to the forging of metalwork when the castle was built.

In trench 16, excavation in a strip about 1m wide alongside the south side of wall 16026 revealed a level, smooth mortar floor surface [16028] some 150mm thick (Illus 13.3, 13.6). A fragment of it was also encountered within the area of the later building (b) as 24019 (Illus 13.30, 13.36). Its surviving surface corresponds in level to 16028. Elsewhere in trenches 16 and 24 to the north of castle wall 16026 it appears that the castle floor was removed by later activities. In trench 16E this mortar floor was encountered as 16030 (Illus 13.14). In trench 23 there were also traces of it [23017] seen in section to the south of building (a) (Illus 13.26). Within the walls of building (a) a small area of it was cleared in trench 16, revealing a patch of burning [16043], perhaps a hearth (Illus 13.3), which was sampled for archaeomagnetic dating by GeoQuest Associates and gave dates of 1230–1310 or 1420–75. The former range is preferred

on stratigraphical grounds. It perhaps gives an indication that occupancy of the castle ceased by the early 14th century.

No precise date was provided by the excavations for the castle's construction. From the fill [16031] of the foundation trench for the east wall [16025B] in trench 16E was recovered a sherd of oxidised gritty ware (SF 16077). Two sherds of white gritty and one of redware were recovered from sandy soil [16070] beneath 16068, the old ground surface pre-dating the castle wall, and in trench 23 a copper alloy dress pin of medieval type (C11) was found in the make-up level [23018] for the castle floor, and a redware cooking pot rim and shoulder (P36) in the ground surface [23033] underlying that. On the one hand, this indicates that the castle was constructed sometime in the 13th century, or the 12th at earliest. On the other hand, it suggests that there was 12th- or 13th-century activity on the island prior to the erection of the castle. Over 40 sherds of medieval wheel-turned pottery, including white gritty, redware, reduced gritty and oxidised gritty, were recovered from trenches 16, 16E, 23 and 24, some in contexts directly related to the castle, the rest probably churned up by later activity.

At least two phases in the castle's demolition can be recognised. First, the reduction and removal of its walls, probably to a uniformly low level. This process resulted in a layer about 300mm thick of mortar and debris inside the castle [16018]. Externally, at least to the north and east, there were tips of mortar and stone [24018, 24010, 1660, 16061]. Subsequently, perhaps not much later, trenches were dug through this demolition debris, along the wall lines, primarily to remove the remaining facing stones. A

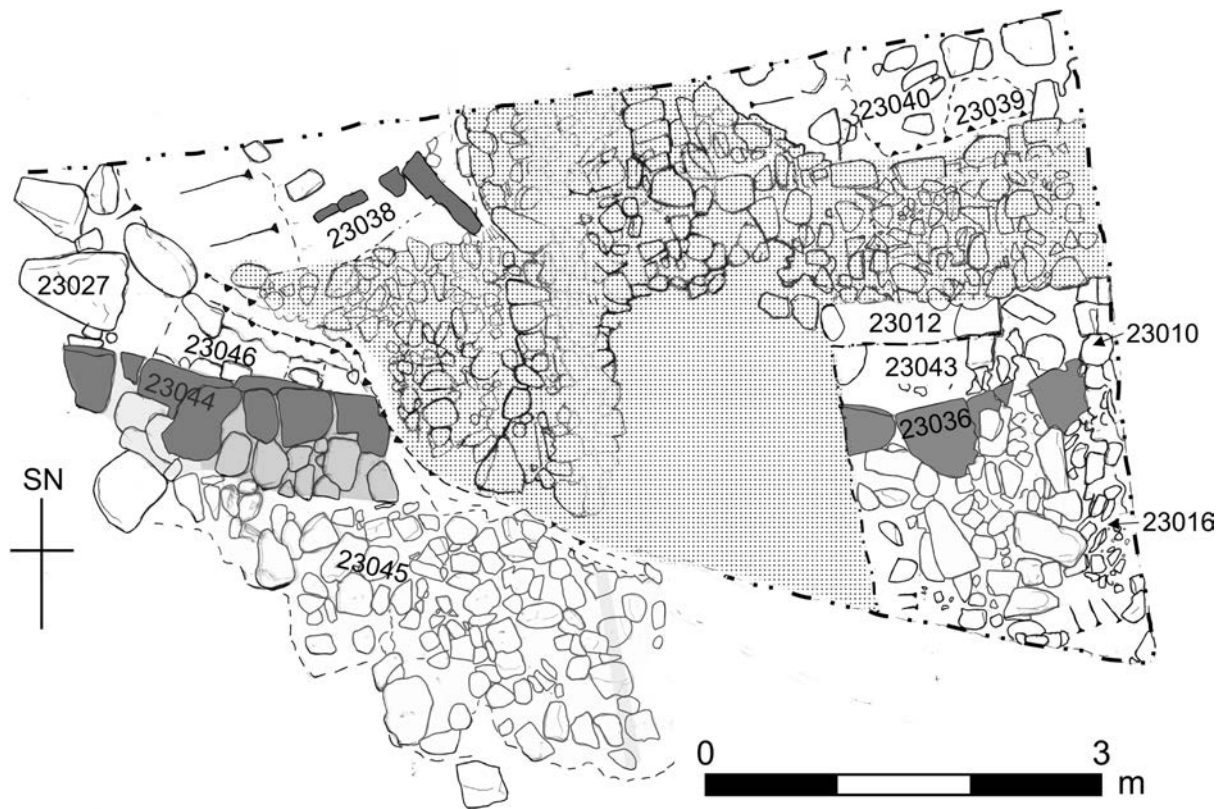


Illustration 13.21
Trench 23, plan with wall of dun

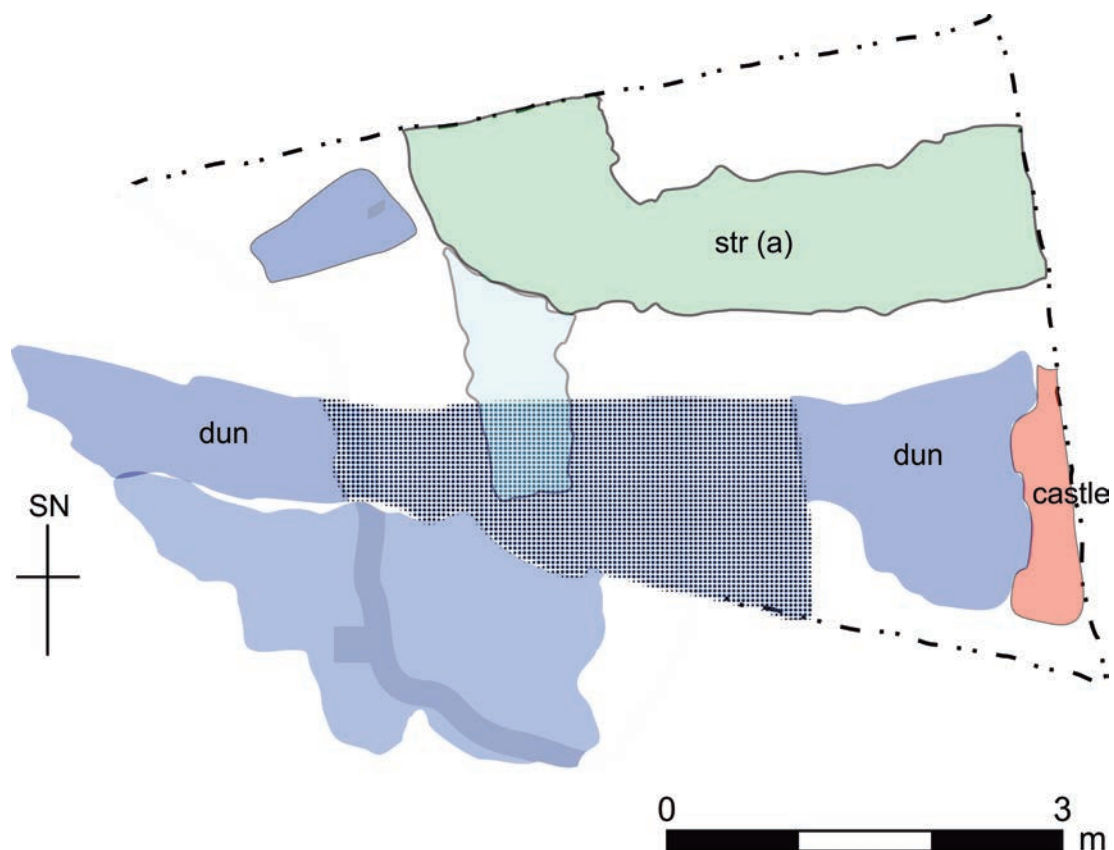


Illustration 13.22
Trench 23, composite interpretative plan



Illustration 13.23
Trench 23, dun wall looking east

robber trench [16079] along the south face of wall 16026 can be seen in section in Illus 13.8. It is cut at right angles by another [16080] that allowed the removal of the interior facing stones of wall 16025. Another robber trench [24028] encountered in trench 24 enabled much of the north wall of the castle to be removed (Illus 13.30), and in trench 23 yet another [23047] was the main clue for the location of the castle's south wall (Illus 13.26).

Sufficient evidence for the castle walls survived for their remains to be used as a base for the foundations of the later medieval houses, (a) and (b). In trench 24 the development of turf, a ground surface [24015], was detected between the ruined castle wall and the wall of structure (b) (Illus 13.33), and in trench 23 a ground surface [23011] was seen to have developed prior to the forming of the earth floor in house (a) (Illus 13.25), suggesting a gap in time between the two.

The dun (Illus 13.21–23, 13.26, 13.27)

Much of the island is composed of the ruins of a dun, a fact of which the builders of the castle would have been aware, although it is probable that when they commenced their work this earlier structure was grassed over. The immediately pre-castle ground surface is represented by 23033, seen in section M–N (Illus 13.26).

Two segments of the curving inner face of a massive drystone wall [23036, 23044] were exposed in trench 23 (Illus 13.21, 13.23). The portion of this face excavated as 23036 had a length of about 1.7m and a width of about 0.8m. It can be expected to have been considerably wider than that, but its outer face would have been beyond the trench. It was composed of large quarried blocks, about 80% limestone, 20% quartzite. At least two courses survived. The

exposed segment to the east [23044] was similar in character, with a length of about 2.3m and three courses surviving. Individual blocks average about 450 by 300 by 200mm in height. The courses tilt outwards, and there is a distinct break between the stones of the inner face and other stonework [23045] to the south, which is probably largely in situ walling rather than tumble. All this suggests deformation or subsidence of the dun remains caused by the weight of the overlying castle walls (Illus 13.21, 13.22).

Very little of the interior of the dun was seen in the excavations apart from stone debris [23025, 23040, 23043, 23046], perhaps derived from the dun walls, loosely packed with soil, leaving several voids. From 23046, adjacent to the interior of the dun wall, was recovered a Neolithic stone axe (X11). A stone box-like feature [23038] was partially revealed within the area enclosed by the dun wall (Illus 13.21, 13.27), but not excavated extensively enough to establish its relationship to 23046 or stratigraphically earlier contexts. It had vertically set side slabs and paving, and a width (or length) of slightly over a metre. Within it the presence of burnt bone, charcoal, pebbles and clay was noted, some of it affected by the formation of an iron pan [23037].

Over the rubble and other material filling up the internal space of the dun was a layer of midden [23034], 200mm thick, composed of mixed ash, animal bone, soil and clay, sealed by the development of the old ground surface [23033] which preceded the erection of the castle (Illus 13.26).

The foundation trench (fill 16076 – see Illus 13.17) for the east wall of the castle [16025] was seen to reach or cut into an earlier deposit [16077] of unknown depth or extent, composed of rubble and sandy silt. It is likely that this is equivalent to the rubble filling of the dun excavated in trench 23 [23025, etc].

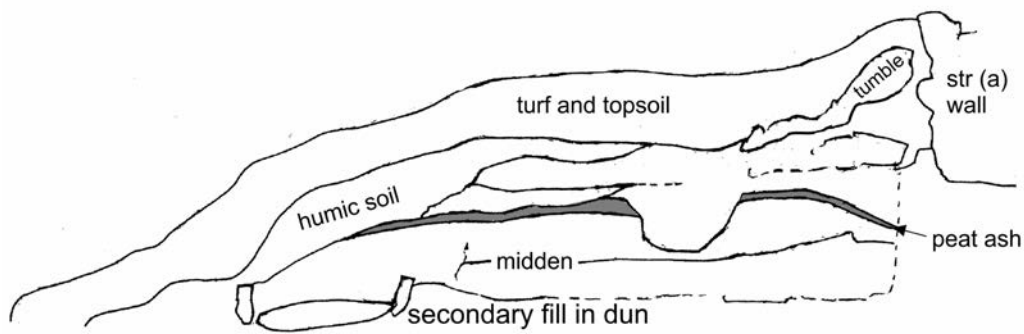
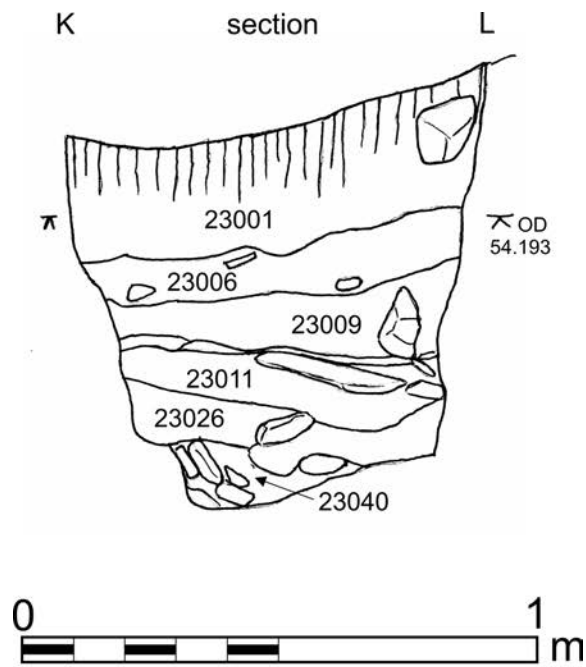
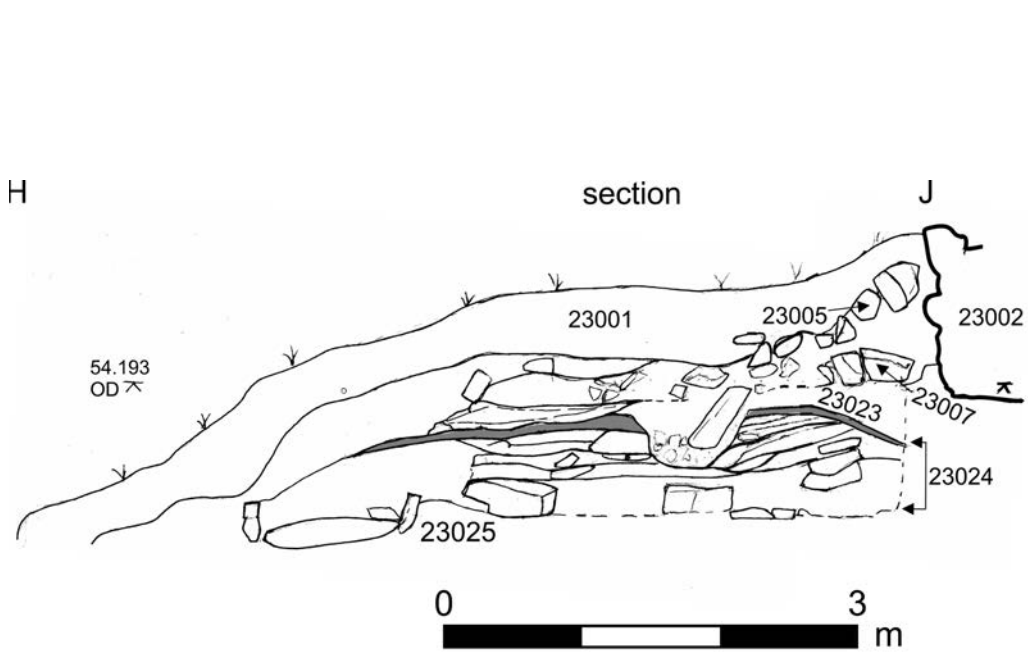
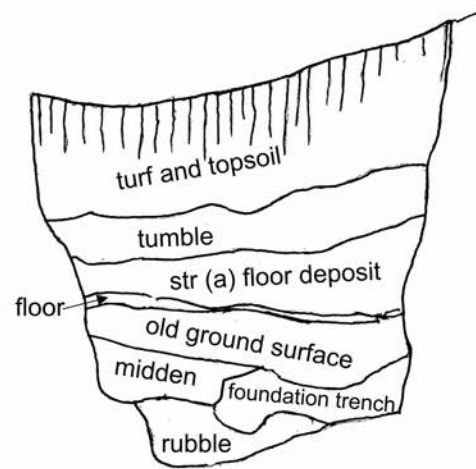


Illustration 13.24
Trench 23, section H-J



interpretation

Illustration 13.25
Trench 23, section K-L

EILEAN NA COMHAIRLE EXCAVATIONS

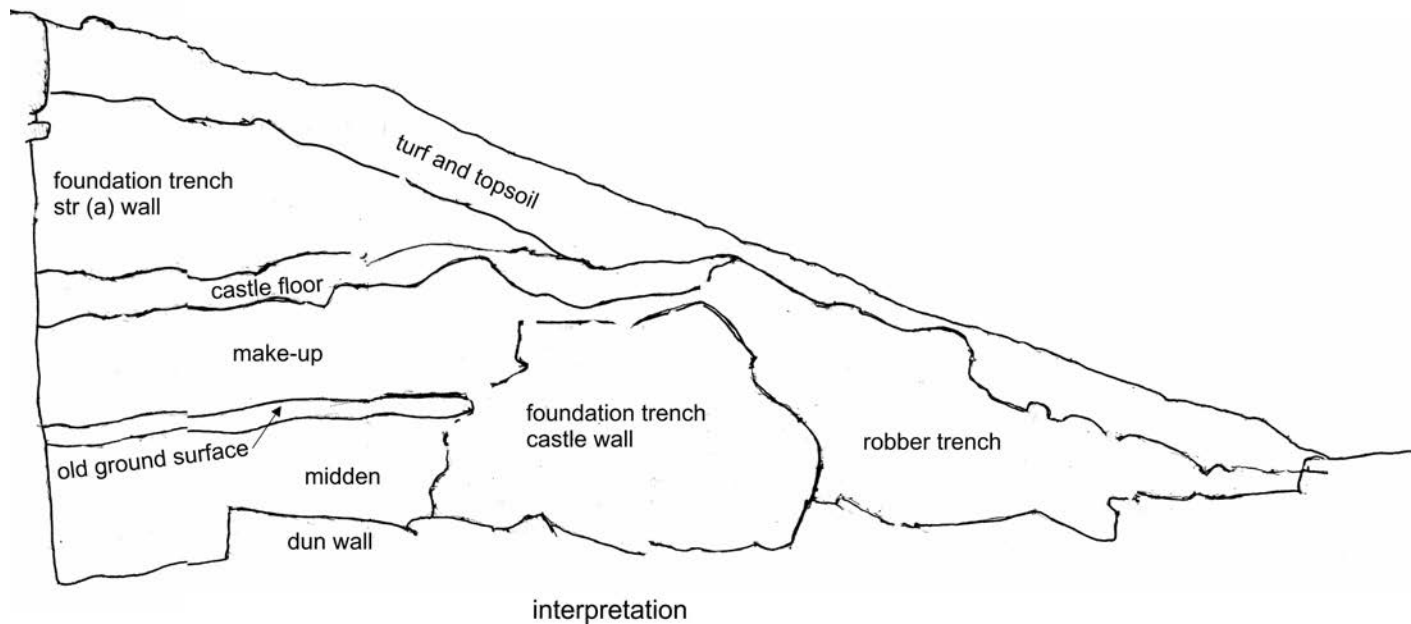
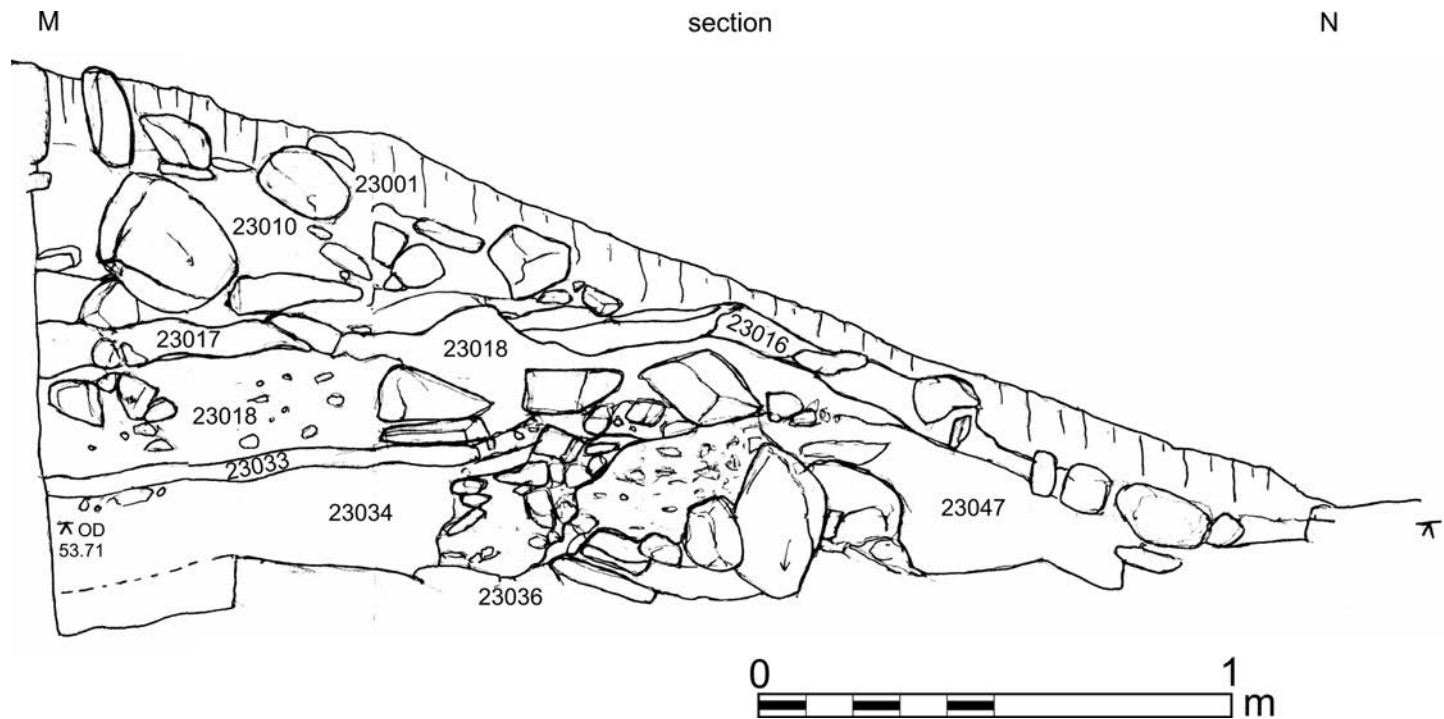


Illustration 13.26
Trench 23, section M-N

FINLAGGAN

Context	Description	Interpretation	Equivalent to
23001	Turf and topsoil	Topsoil	
23002	Grit, gravel, 5% mortar debris	Washout from ruin of (a)	
23003	Boulders and blocks, sand, grit	Walls of (a), south-west corner	
23004	Boulders, slabs, soil/grit	Wall from south-west (a) to island edge	
23005	Rock fragments	Tumble from wall 23003, south of (a)	
23006	Stones, dark brown soil	Tumble and topsoil in (a)	
23007	Blocks and boulders, 30% soil	Path, crude cobbling, east of (a)	
23009	Peaty soil, 10% grit	Occupation deposit in (a)	16017
23010	Stones and slabs, up to 40% soil	Tumble to south of (a)	
23011	Soil	Old ground surface	
23012	Peat ash	Midden deposit	
23014	Soil	Topsoil	
23016	Mortar, sand, 10% gravel	Within 23017	
23017	Mortar and gravel	Weathered castle floor	
23018	Clayey soil, 5% small stones	Make-up layer	
23023	Dark grey-brown clay-rich soil	Old ground surface	16022, 23011
23024	Black-red burnt material	Peat ash	
23025	Loose earth and stones	Fill, secondary, in dun	
23026	Peaty soil, 5% gravel	Pre-castle midden deposit	23034
23027	Large stone blocks	Tumble	
23028	Dark brown soil	Fill of 23027	
23031	Large stone blocks	As 23027	
23033	Dark grey-brown clay soil	Old ground surface	
23034	Dark brown clay soil, ash	Pre-castle midden deposit	
23036	Large quarried blocks, 20% soil	Dun wall	
23037	Stony clay soil, 50% charcoal	Fill of 23038	
23038	Set slabs	Secondary fireplace in dun?	
23039	Orange clayey ash	Midden deposit	
23040	Slabs and blocks, 5% soil	Prehistoric tumble	
23043	Slabs and blocks, 10% soil	As 23040	
23044	Large slabs, 10% soil	Dun wall	
23045	Large slabs, 10% soil	Dun wall	
23046	Stony soil, 50% clay	Secondary occupation or tumble	
23047	Dark brown clay soil	Robber trench fill	

Table 13.2
Trench 23 contexts

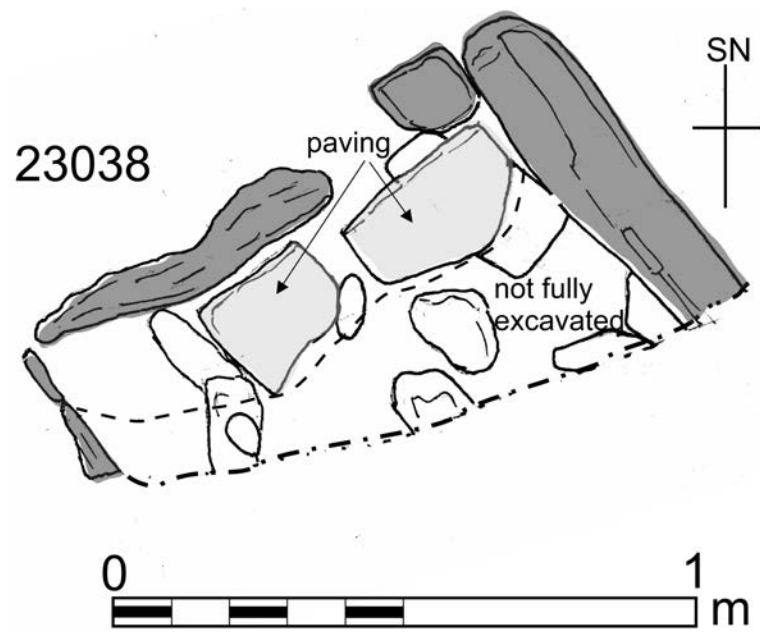


Illustration 13.27
Trench 23, feature 23038



Illustration 13.28
Trench 24, looking north over wall of house (b)

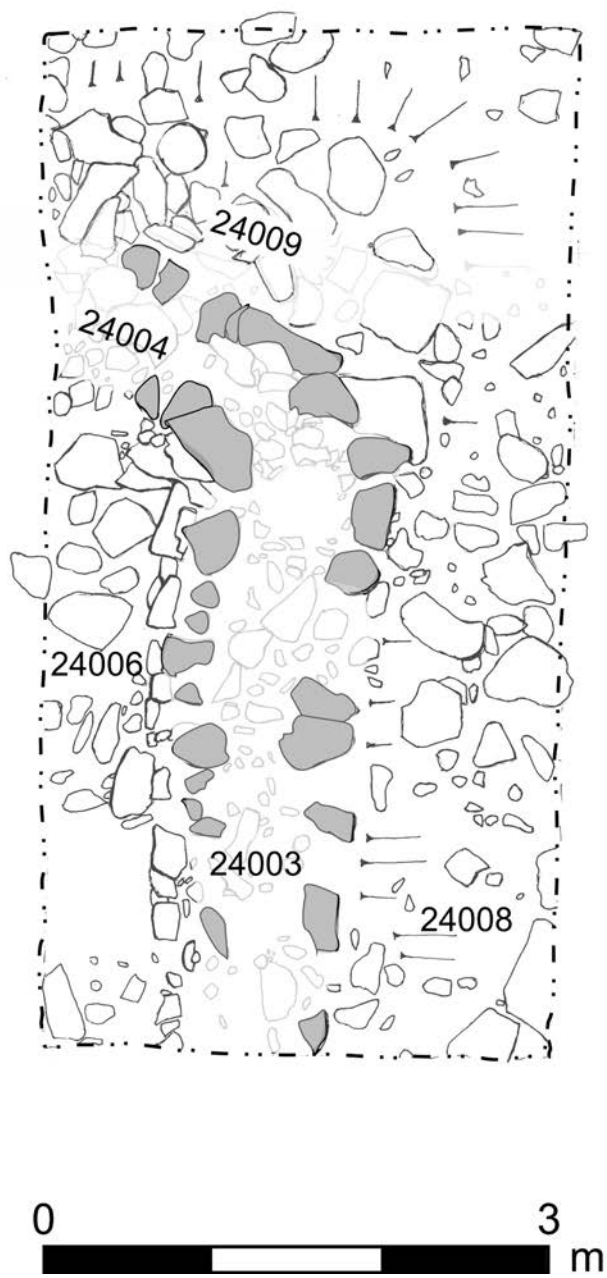


Illustration 13.29
Trench 24, wall of house (b)

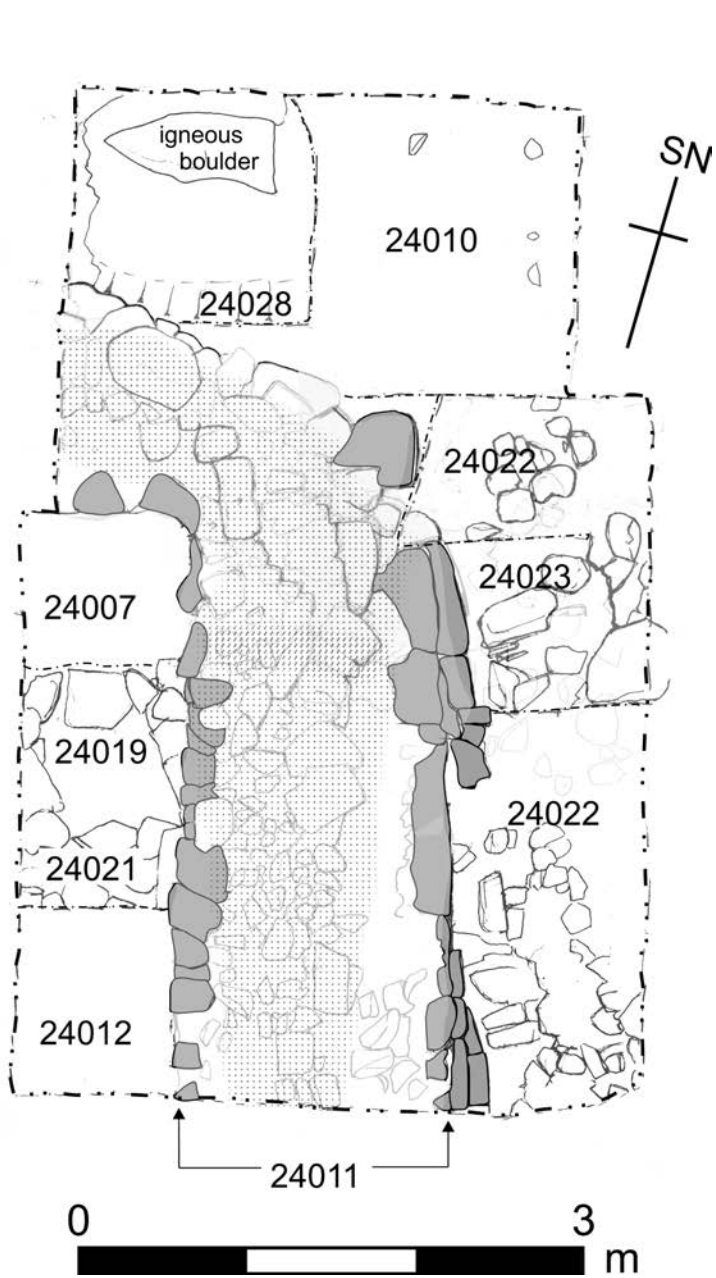


Illustration 13.30
Trench 24, castle wall

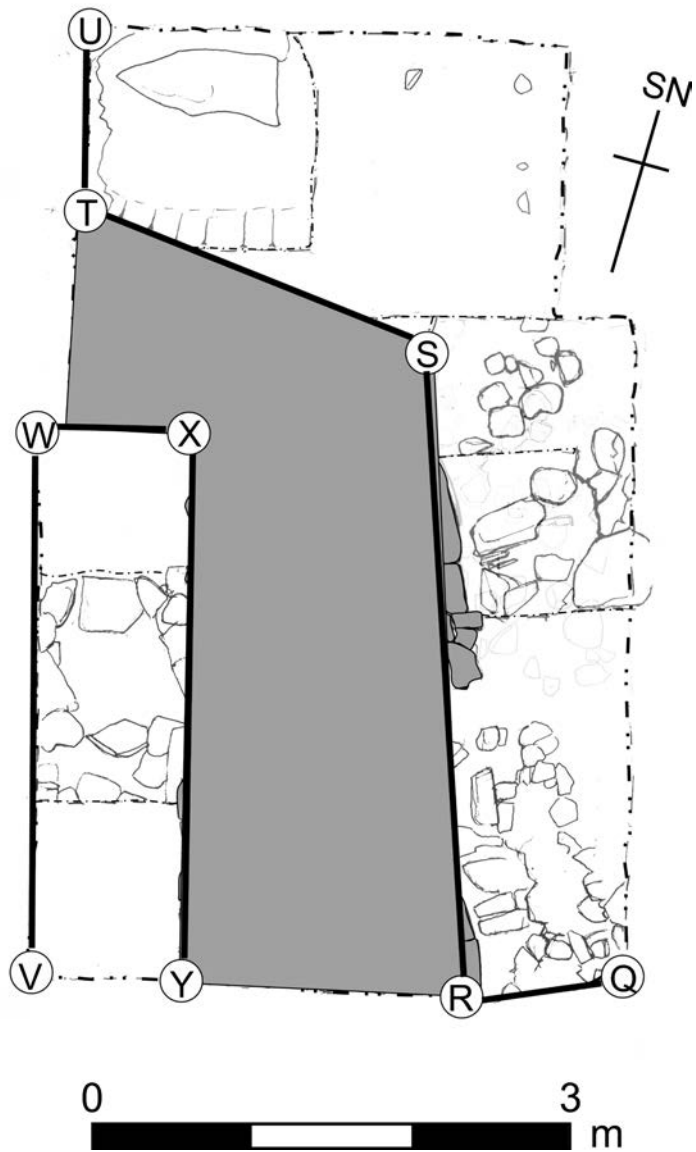


Illustration 13.31
Trench 24, location plan of section drawings

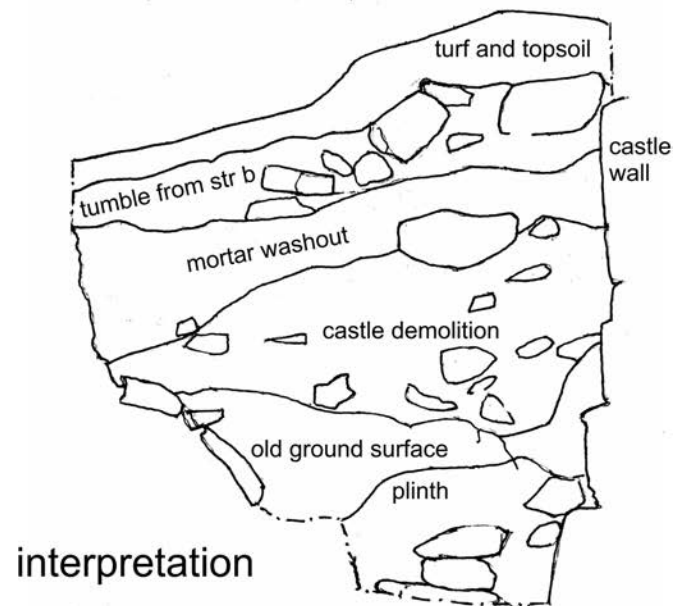
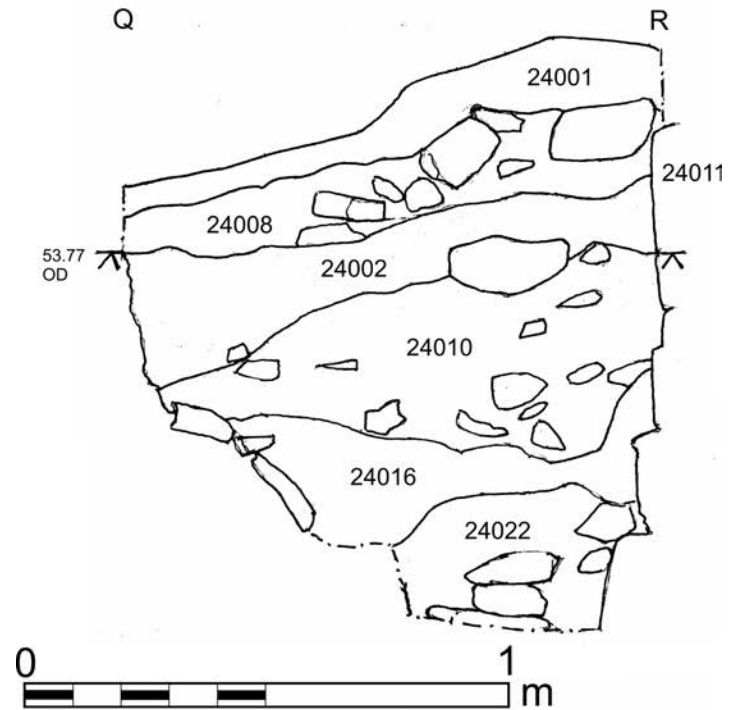


Illustration 13.32
Trench 24, section Q-R

FINLAGGAN

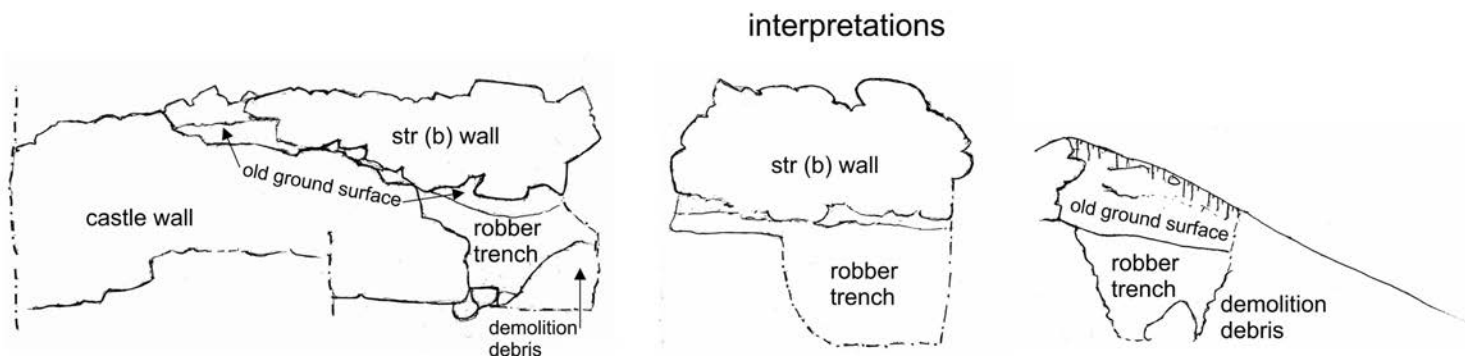
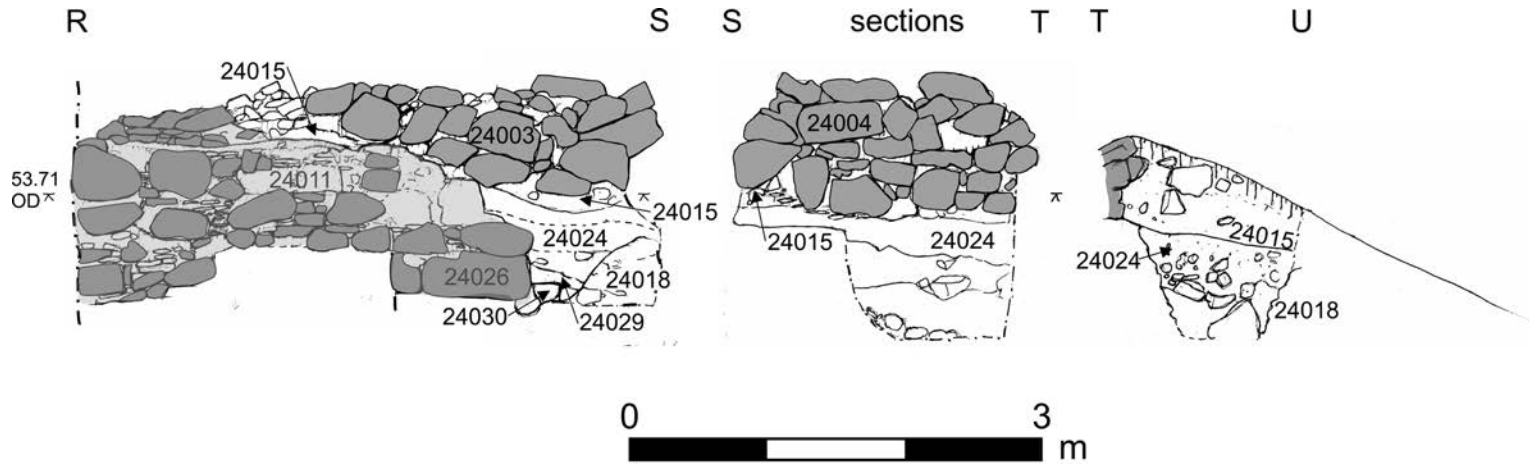


Illustration 13.33
Trench 24, sections R-S, S-T, T-U

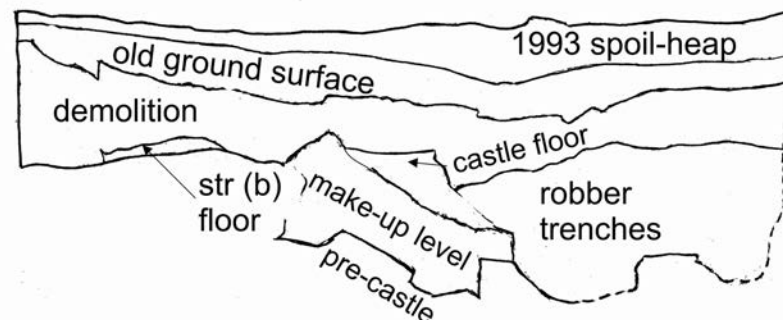
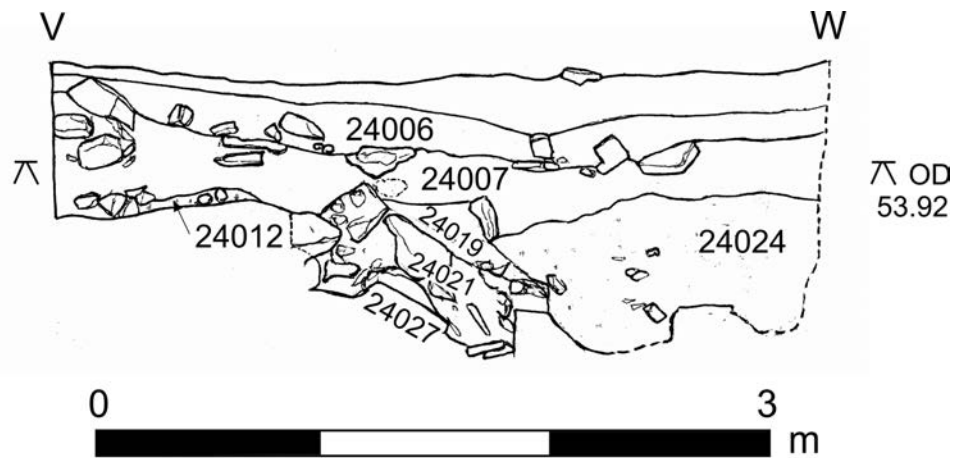


Illustration 13.34
Trench 24, section V-W



Illustration 13.35
Trench 24, interior north-east corner of wall of house (b)

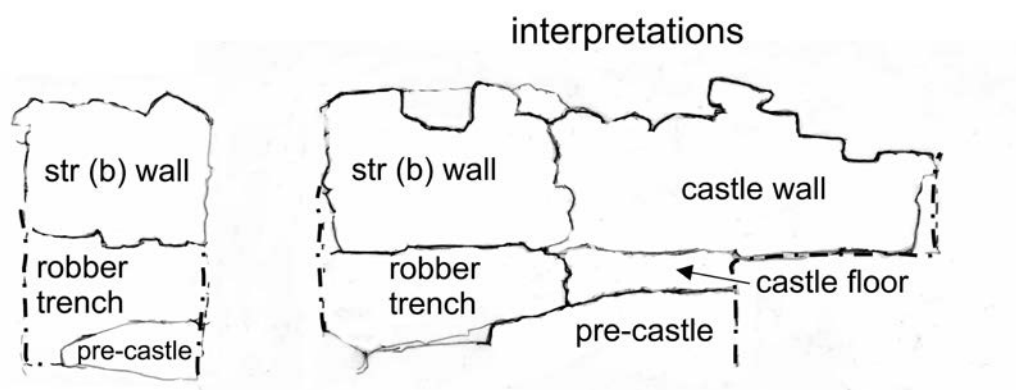
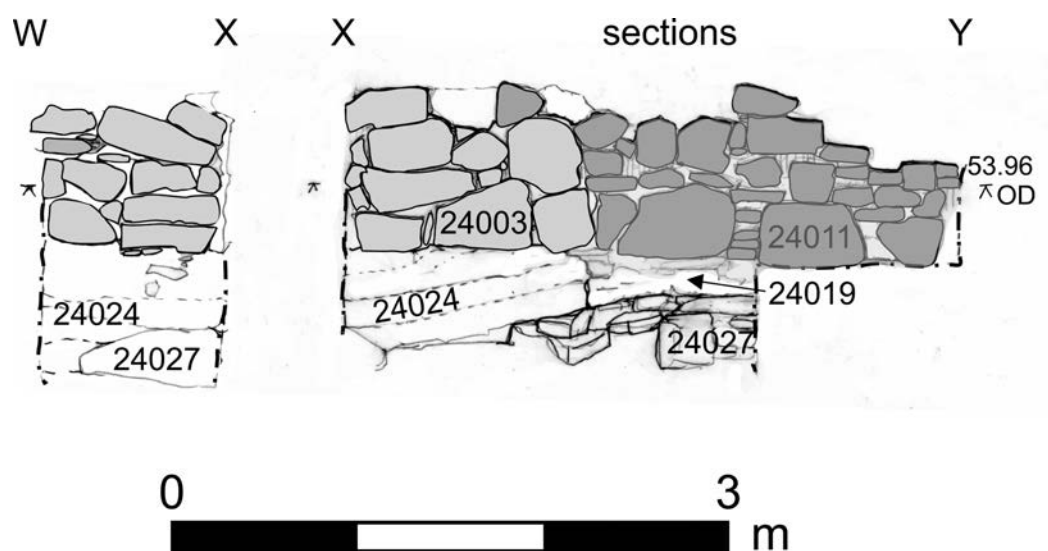


Illustration 13.36
Trench 24, sections W-X, X-Y

Context	Description	Interpretation	Equivalent to
24001	Turf and soil, vegetation	Topsoil	
24002	Gravel, sand, 5% mortar	Mortar washout from 24003	
24003	Slabs, blocks, 5% rotted mortar	East wall of (b)	
24004	Slabs and blocks	North wall of (b)	
24006	Slabs, blocks, 35% soil	Demolition/collapse of (b)	
24007	Peaty soil, up to 30% gravel	Post-occupation soil development	16023
24008	Tumble and soil	Tumble from wall 24003	
24009	Slabs, boulders, 20% soil, grit	Tumble from wall 24004	
24010	Mortar debris, stone fragments	Demolition of wall 24011	
24011	Lime-mortared masonry	North/south castle wall	16025
24012	Dark brown, gritty soil	Floor of (b)	16024
24013	Soil, up to 25% gravel	Soil within 24009	
24015	Dark brown soil, 10% grit	Old ground surface	
24016	Clay, silt, 20% stone fragments	Old ground surface	
24018	Mortar debris	Demolition of castle	
24019	Mortar, 10% sand	Castle floor	
24020	Black silty soil, 10% rock fragments	Make-up level	
24021	Phyllite slabs, 20% clay and soil	Make-up level	
24022	Stones, 25% silty clay	Castle plinth	16035, 16062
24023	Rocks, 30% soil and clay	Fill of foundation trench	
24024	Mortar and sand	Top fill of cut 24028	
24026	Large boulder	Foundation of wall 24011	
24027	Rocks, 20% soil and clay	Pre-castle	
24028	Cut	Robber trench	
24029	Mortar and sand, organic 20%	Bottom fill of 24028	
24030	Burnt clay or slab	Pre-castle	

Table 13.3
Trench 24 contexts

EILEAN NA COMHAIRLE EXCAVATIONS

Trench 25 (Illus 13.37–40, Table 13.4)

In 1997 midden deposits on the bottom of the loch, adjacent to Eilean na Comhairle on the side facing Eilean Mór, were sampled from within the confines of a dam with an area of about 80 sq m. For recording purposes, the working area was gridded into metre squares, in rows from C to G and columns from 4 to 8. Thus, each square could be identified by a letter and number, from C6 to G8 (Illus 13.39). A more detailed explanation of the system used is provided in the section on trench 25 excavation and recording in Chapter 1. It is estimated that the midden may have spread over a total area of about 400 sq m, including, on the basis of the excavation of sondages 4 and 5, the fringes of the island itself. Refuse probably settled here because this side of the island is sheltered. The causeway to Eilean Mór and possibly a jetty may have helped to trap it.

The surface of the loch bottom within the dam was flat, dropping eastwards about 25cm from the present shore of the island. We trowelled an area 4m east–west and 5m north–south

(Illus 13.40), removing topsoil [25001] and sand and gravel beach material [25002, 25003], permeated by an iron pan [25004]. Medieval artefacts were recovered from these surface deposits, including from the iron pan in F5 an English short-cross penny of the early 13th century (N2). This material had probably mostly been washed out from the edge of the island.



Illustration 13.37
Aerial view of dam with trench 25



Illustration 13.38
Trench 25

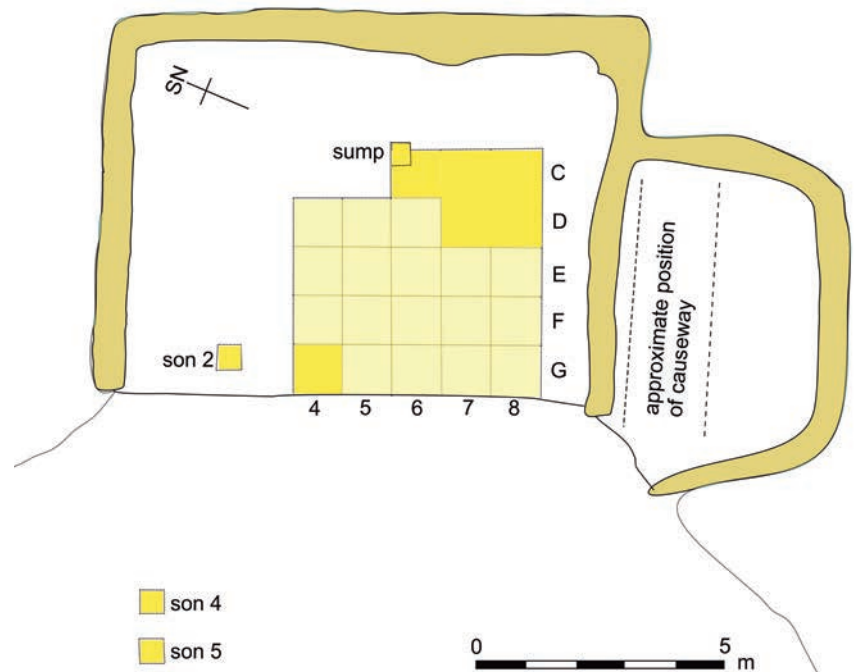


Illustration 13.39
Trench 25, grid system

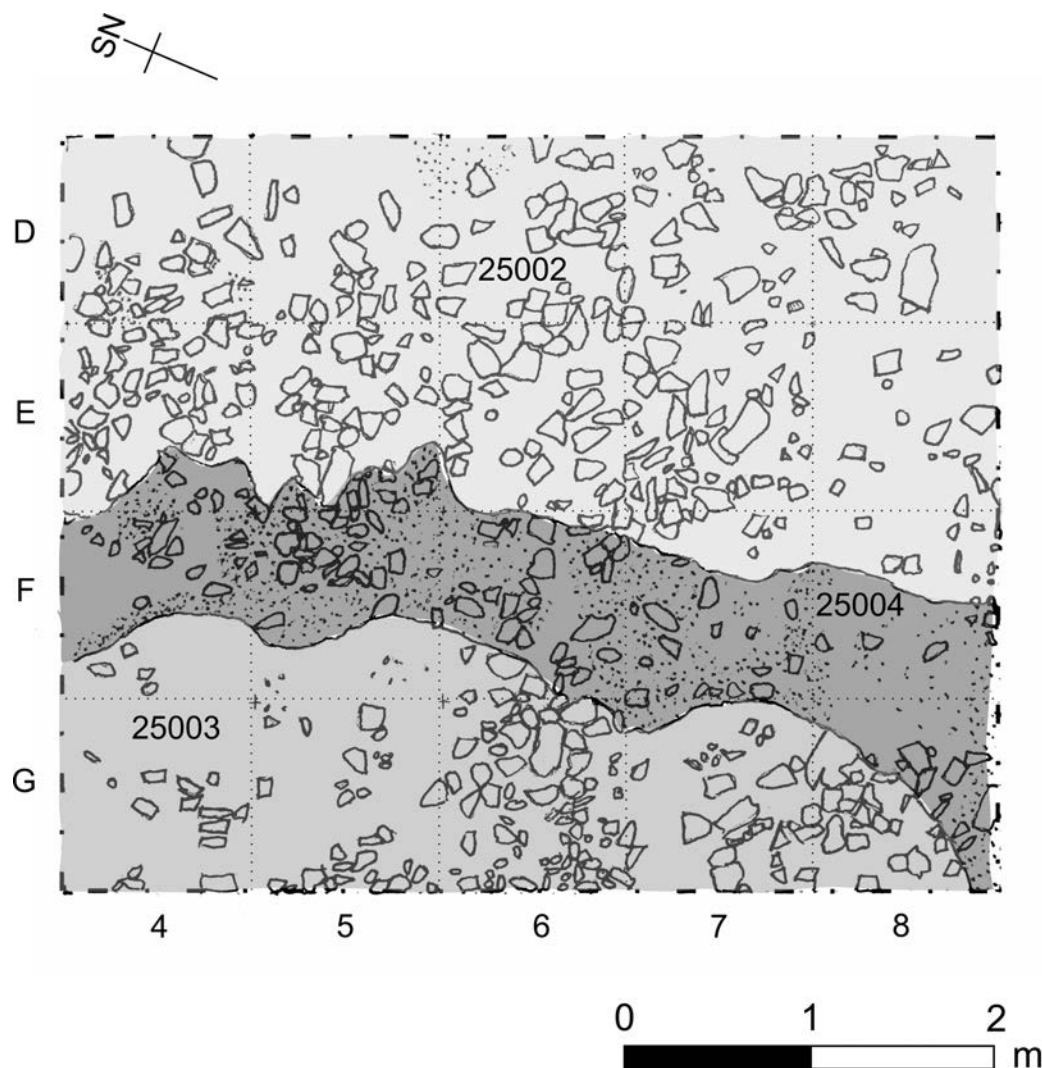


Illustration 13.40
Trench 25, surface deposits

A medieval midden (Illus 13.41–47)

The gravel, sand and iron pan sealed a substantial midden [25008], the prime target of the 1997 project. Further excavation was undertaken in five adjacent metre squares (C8, C7, C6, D8, D7), as well as a separate metre square (G4), removing all 25008 present. This 25008 midden was also encountered in sondage 2, 1.5m to the north of G4. In two small sondages (4 and 5) excavated on the island proper, to the west of the dam, midden [25026, 25031] is also present, here without waterlogging and preservation of organic content. It is, however, likely to be the equivalent of 25008.

A comprehensive sampling and sieving strategy was developed, with the work supervised by Leonie Paterson. All excavated soil was wet sieved on-site through a 1cm mesh. The midden had a depth of about 400mm. Because no stratification could be observed in it, it was removed in horizontal spits, each a few centimetres deep, labelled A to G from top to bottom (with an extra spit marked as H in G4). Scrutiny of the excavated sections in G4

later suggested that there were layers in it that were sloping down gently northwards, perhaps here close to the midden's edge. The excavated spits in G4 did not totally respect this configuration (Illus 13.47). Samples of about 3 litres each were taken from each spit for processing for insect remains and other analyses. Ten litres of soil from each spit in squares C8 and G4 were subjected to flotation sieving for the recovery of seeds and other small pieces of organic matter.

The midden had an organic, sandy, fibrous matrix, packed with considerable quantities of environmental material and artefacts, the subject of more detailed reports in the Catalogue (Illus 13.41). Suffice it to note here that there were considerable quantities of animal bone, some of fish and birds, clearly relating to high-status dining. There was an abundance of hazelnut shells and some fragments of almonds and walnuts, along with cherry stones, seeds and strands of moss. There were pieces of round wood, twigs and off-cuts of worked timber. Illustration 13.45

EILEAN NA COMHAIRLE EXCAVATIONS



Illustration 13.41
Trench 25, medieval midden (spit C of 25008) in square C8

shows some typical residue left after sieving on-site through 1cm mesh. Artefacts included leather shoes (H1 and H2), a leather draw-string pouch (H3), wooden pins, and pieces of wooden drinking or eating vessels. There were also over 100 sherds of Scottish wheel-turned pottery, the majority white gritty, and three sherds of imported Saintonge wares.

Also included in the 25008 midden were significant quantities of rock fragments (Illus 13.45). A report by Nigel Ruckley on samples from spits A, B and C is lodged in the site archive. It notes that the rock is all local, mainly limestone and phyllite, and the fragments are mainly angular to sub-angular in shape, mostly smaller than 10cm across. Ruckley supposed that if the fragments

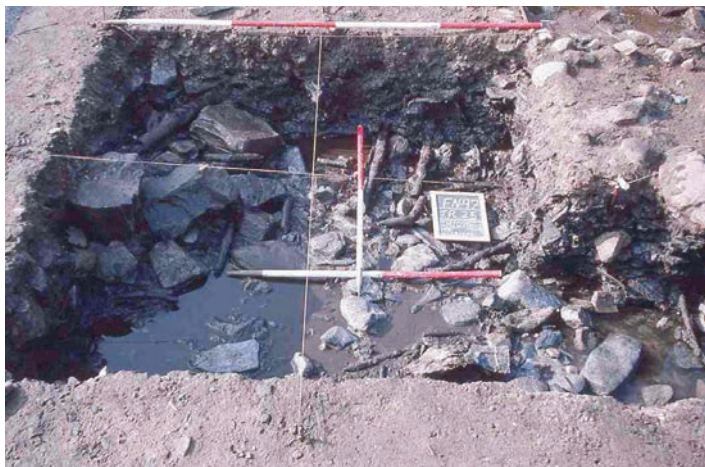


Illustration 13.42
Trench 25, main excavated area looking west with rubble 25013 to the left.
The crossed ranging rods are on the 25013 cobbling

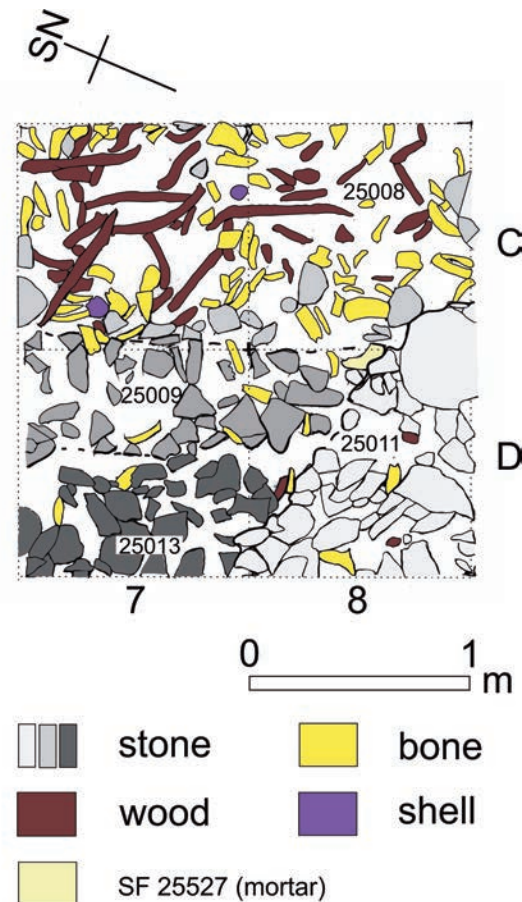


Illustration 13.43
Trench 25, plan of main excavated area, medieval contexts

N facing section

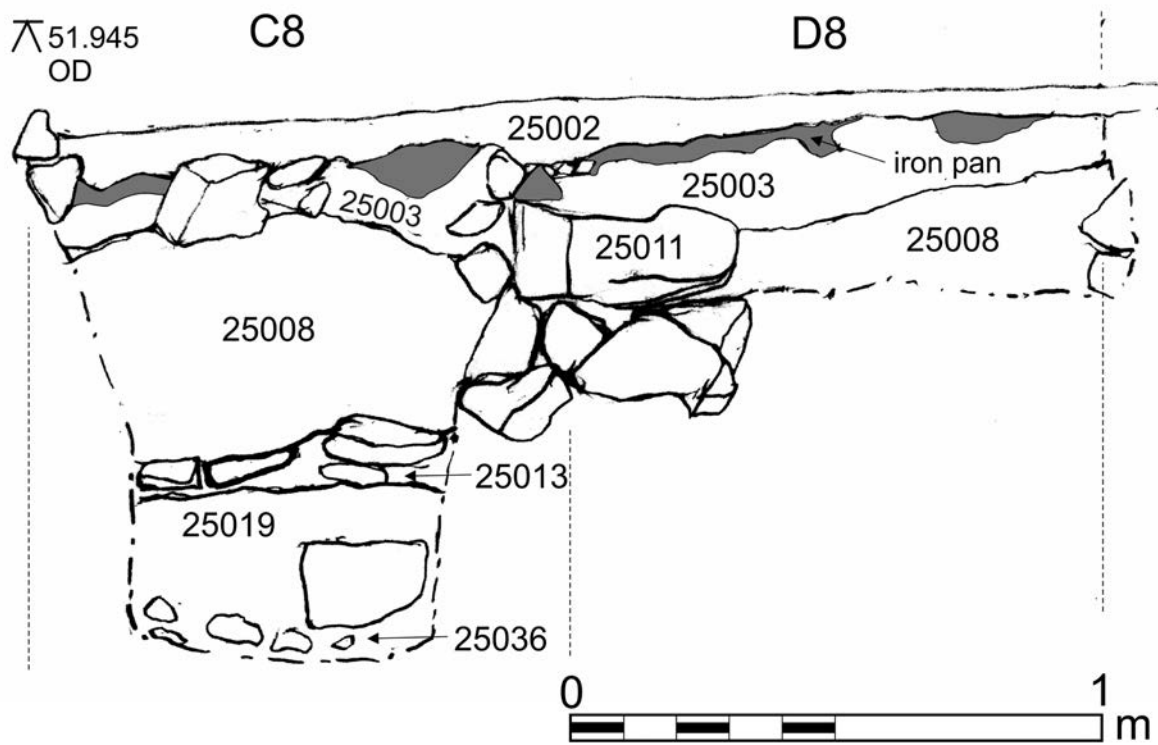


Illustration 13.44
Trench 25, main excavated area, north-facing section



Illustration 13.45
Trench 25, typical sieved residue from the medieval midden 25008

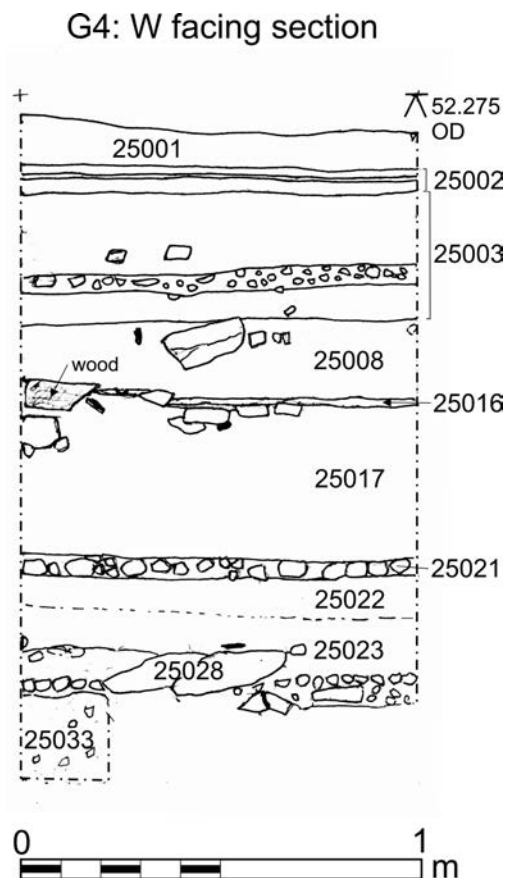


Illustration 13.46

Trench 25, square G4, west-facing section

C8 east facing

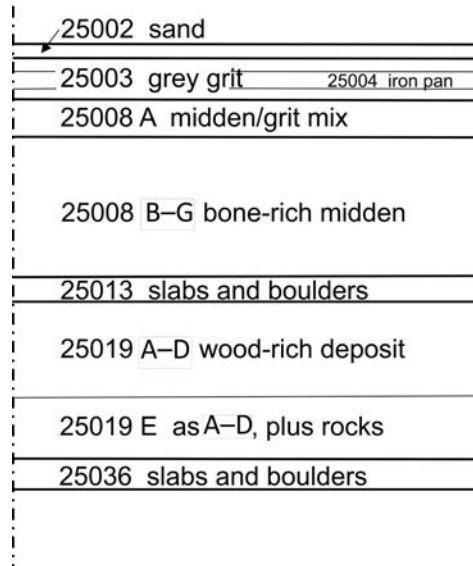
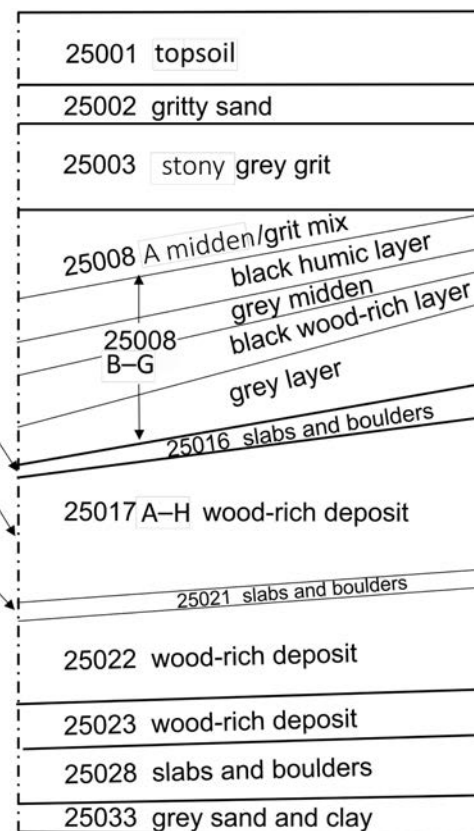


Illustration 13.47

Trench 25, diagrammatic concordance between contexts in square G4 and main excavation

G4 north facing



came either from the loch or the glacial gravels there would have been a greater proportion of sub-rounded to sub-angular stones. He therefore suggested that the material included builders' waste material.

Also within the 25008 midden, projecting into square D8 from the south, was some stone rubble [25011], apparently tumble rather than a built feature. A possible explanation is that this is castle stonework dropped by accident from the causeway as it was being taken away for reuse on Eilean Mór (Illus 13.42, 13.43). Other stonework [25009] at the bottom of 25008 consists of rough limestone blocks, each less than 200mm across, arranged as a linear feature less than half a metre wide and only one course high, running north-south (Illus 13.43). It is possible that this represents the remains of a wall or revetment. Included in it was a broken stone mortar (R85) of medieval date.

It is suggested in the ceramics report that the range of Scottish wares from this midden is likely to date prior to about 1300. The sherds of imported French pottery are also believed to date to the 13th or early 14th century. With the caveat that the spits in which midden 25008 was excavated may bear little relationship to a stratigraphic sequence, it is noticeable that wheel-made pottery almost all comes from spits A to D. Only 5 sherds were got in spit E and 3 in spit F. There may be a clue here that midden 25008 began to accumulate before the importation of this pottery to Finlaggan. Seven fragments of lime mortar were also recorded from

midden 25008, all from spits E and F. There was also a small piece of sandstone (SF 25020) from spit F in C6, possibly, like the mortar, derived from building operations at the castle.

A crannog (Illus 13.46–49)

Feature 25009 lay on cobbling [25013] covering the area of C6, C7 and D7. It was not exposed in D8. It consisted of rough blocks and slabs, mostly of limestone. Also resting on this cobbling, and under 25009, were several lengths of round wood, 40mm or more in diameter, arranged parallel to each other, approximately east-west (Illus 13.42, 13.48). It is also noticeable how similar sticks to the east of feature 25009 generally had a north-south orientation (Illus 13.41, 13.43).

Further digging in the main area of excavation was confined to squares C7 and C8. Two empty post-settings were identified in the 25013 cobbling (Illus 13.48). One [25014], half-sectioned by the east baulk, had an internal diameter of about 0.45m, defined by limestone edge stones. The other [25015] is less certain, represented by edge stones forming only half its internal diameter of about 0.7m. Under the 25013 cobbling was another organic-rich deposit [25019], similar to 25008 but with noticeably greater quantities of wood, especially withies and also pieces of peat. It had a depth of about 0.25m. There was some animal bone and an iron rivet (SF 25160), but also in the small area excavated the stubs

of three birch posts [25034, 25035] and a group of stakes [25032], all encountered in situ (Illus 13.49). It is probable that this wood-work with the overlying cobbling represents the remains of a crannog. An underlying wood-rich organic deposit with blocks of limestone and quartzite [25036], some 200mm thick, rested on a mix of gravel and midden [25037] of unknown depth.

One further metre square, G4, was fully excavated to a considerable depth (Illus 13.46, 13.47), through a comparable sequence of deposits. A diagrammatic concordance is given in Illus 13.47. A radiocarbon date from a piece of worked wood in 25017 (equivalent to 25019) gave a 1σ calibrated age range of AD 434–598 (2σ cal AD 419–637). Earlier crannog material underneath 25017 was excavated to a loch bottom of sand and clay [25033]. Another radiocarbon determination was got from a piece of hazel branch wood from within this earlier crannog material [25022]. It

provided a 1σ calibrated age range of BC 89 – AD 46 (2σ cal BC 168 – AD 71).

A note on sampling of the midden in 1998

In the summer of 1998 a further small excavation was made in sector C1, adjacent to Eilean na Comhairle, by Clive Warsop. This was made possible by the construction of a new dam and the removal of loch water. A section through the medieval midden was achieved and an extensive programme undertaken of wet sieving, flotation and sampling for the retrieval of palaeoenvironmental remains, the primary purpose of the project. The work was done just within the confines of the 1997 dam (Illus 13.39), to the north (site north) of the area of trench 25, using an extension of the recording system for that trench. A brief report on the 1998 excavation was published by Warsop in 1998. The important group of medieval artefacts that was recovered, including a silver brooch (S3) and copper alloy mounts from dog collars (C87 and C88), is included in the corpus of finds dealt with in this report.

Interpretation

The prehistoric origins of settlement on Eilean na Comhairle are clear from these excavations. It is probably best to take a cautious view with the Neolithic stone axe (X11) and not conclude that its presence in a later context implies Neolithic settlement. Over 1,000 struck lithics generally of Mesolithic type were recovered from trench 25, but none from contexts that could be regarded as of that date.

The interpretation that appears merited by the limited extent of excavation at Eilean na Comhairle is that an approximately circular fort or dun with massive drystone walls and an overall diameter of about 20m was erected at some time in the Iron Age, probably on a rocky island, not significantly larger than the dun itself, nor emerging much more than a metre above the surface of

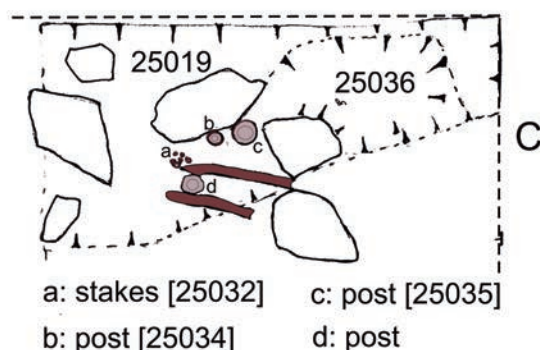
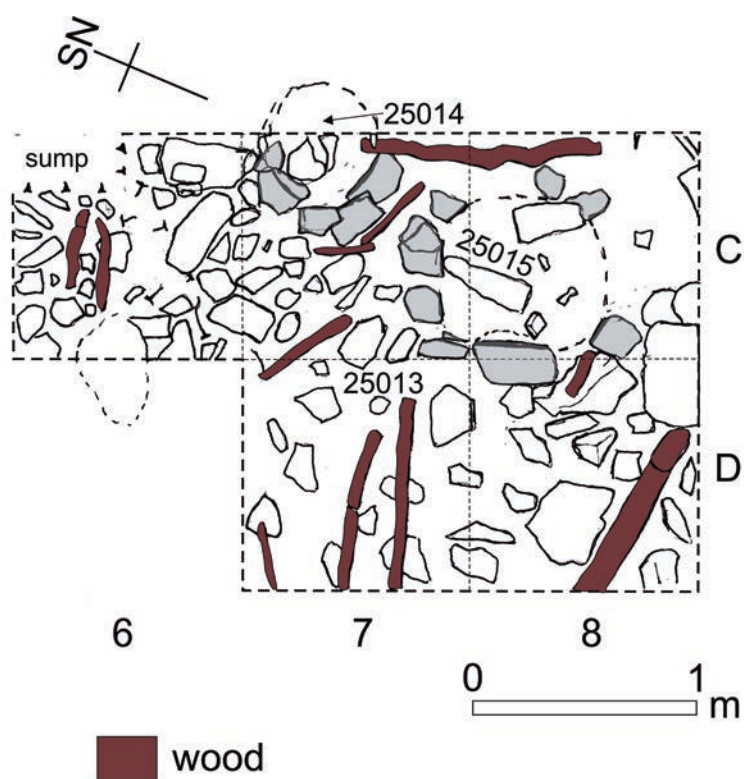


Illustration 13.48

Trench 25, main excavated area, crannog contexts



Illustration 13.49

Trench 25, a stake and two posts at time of excavation, from left to right: 25032, 25035, 25034

EILEAN NA COMHAIRLE EXCAVATIONS

Context	Description	Interpretation	Equivalent to
25001	Turf and soil, vegetation	Topsoil	
25002	Sand	Beach material	
25003	Gravel	Beach material	
25004	Iron-rich compacted sand, gravel	Iron pan	
25008	Organic rich	Medieval midden	
25009	Limestone slabs	Wall? Revetment?	
25011	Blocks and boulders	Tumble	
25013	Slabs, mostly limestone	Cobbling	
25014	Post-setting	Crannog structure	
25015	Post-setting	Crannog structure	
25016	Slabs, mostly limestone	Cobbling in G4	
25017	Peat, wood-rich organic deposit	Crannog structure in G4	
25019	Peat, wood-rich organic deposit	Crannog structure	
25021	Slabs and boulders	Crannog structure in G4	25036
25022	Organic, wood rich	Crannog structure in G4	
25023	Organic, wood rich	Crannog structure in G4	
25026	Stone, clay soil mix	Medieval midden in sondage 4	25008
25028	Slabs and boulders	Crannog structure? G4	
25031	Stone, clay soil mix	Medieval midden in sondage 5	25008
25032	Group of stakes	Crannog structure	
25033	Sand and clay	Loch bottom	
25034	Wooden post	Crannog structure	
25035	Wooden post	Crannog structure	
25036	Slabs and boulders	Crannog structure	25021
25037	Mixed gravel and midden	Crannog structure	

Table 13.4
Trench 25 contexts

the loch. Whether the actual stone causeway that substantially still survives underwater, or an earlier version of stone or timber, it is reasonable to suppose that there was from the beginning access by such means from Eilean Mór.

The soil and rubble fill in the interior of the dun may represent an attempt to level up the site after its abandonment to serve as a platform for later structures, or it may be part of a scheme to create secondary structures or houses within the wall of the dun while it was still standing. The partially excavated box-like structure [23038] may be the hearth for such a house.

Excavation in trench 25 indicates an associated peat and brushwood crannog structure, held together by timbers, built in shallow water adjacent to the dun. Compression, collapse and deliberate destruction will be among the factors that account for its remains only on the loch bottom. Interpretation of the two radiocarbon dates is problematical. They could either indicate a long-lived, refurbished construction, potentially from about the time of Christ into the 7th century AD, or else two structures separated by a considerable period of time. Neither date necessarily has much relevance for the dun.

Although the next major phase of activity on Eilean na Comhairle is represented by the building of the castle, perhaps about 1200, there are clues that the island was not totally abandoned in between, including the midden 23034, stratigraphically later than the dun and earlier than the castle. The presence of sherds of

medieval pottery, including, as noted above, P36 from contexts of earlier date than the construction of the castle, raises the possibility that the castle may have had a medieval predecessor.

The walling identified as the remains of a castle probably belonged to a massive tower rather than a small open enclosure castle. That is the implication of the mortar floor, ideal for a roofed structure but not typical of open spaces. It had an overall north-south length of about 19m, and we have supposed that it might, in line with many other early stone towers, have been square. A possible explanation for the straight join in the east wall near the entrance doorway is that this is something to do with a forework, either intended or realised, but not part of the original plan. This is a point that might easily be determined by a geophysical survey or limited excavation. Seemingly also an afterthought is the provision of a plinth along the exterior of at least the east wall, thickening the exterior wall from 1.8 to about 2.5m.

A key observation to make about the Finlaggan castle is that considerable efforts were made to remove it. There is no clear evidence as to whether enemy action played some part in this or it resulted from a change of requirements or activities. Indeed, the castle may not have been a completed building. Whether it was or not, much of its stonework may have been removed from the island for reuse on Eilean Mór. It was not replaced by a defensive structure on Eilean na Comhairle, nor does it appear that

perimeter defences were maintained on Eilean Mór in the 14th and 15th centuries. If, as argued above, the castle was a substantial tower, it is possible that it had developed structural problems as a result of its placement on top of the earlier dun.

The substantial medieval midden [25008] sampled in trench 25 obviously largely relates to the occupation of the castle. While it may have started forming prior to the building of the castle, none of the recovered artefacts could be expected to be any more recent than the early 14th century. The midden contents are suggestive of a high-status family living there for extended periods of time. The recovery in 1998 of several decorated metal mounts identified as belonging to dog collars is both an important indication of this and confirmation of the significance of Finlaggan as a place that its noble owners used as a base for hunting.

The development of a ground surface over the castle ruins prior to the erection of houses (a) and (b) suggests that there was probably a gap in time between the two. No close dating evidence for the erection and use of structures (a), (b) and (c) was gathered, nor did the excavations add anything substantial to our understanding of their function. The writer is inclined to suggest that building (a) was the council chamber mentioned by Donald Munro (Munro 1961: 56–57). It was the largest of the three houses, placed centrally and side-on to the approach from the causeway. It had entrances in both sides and an open courtyard area facing Eilean Mór. The limited evidence suggests it might be reconstructed as a single-storey hall with open roof. This might offer a suitably prestigious setting for important meetings.