



Society of Antiquaries  
of **Scotland**

# The Archaeology of Finlaggan, Islay

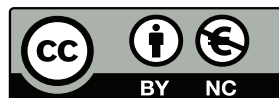
David Caldwell

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

The text in this work is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International licence (CC BY-NC 4.0). This licence allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the work and to adapt the work for non-commercial purposes, providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

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>

**Important:** The illustrations and figures in this work are not covered by the terms of the Creative Commons licence. Permissions must be obtained from third-party copyright holders to reproduce any of the illustrations.



Every effort has been made to obtain permissions from the copyright holders of third-party material reproduced in this work. The Society of Antiquaries of Scotland would be grateful to hear of any errors or omissions.

Society of Antiquaries of Scotland is a registered Scottish charity number SC 010440. Visit our website at [www.socantscot.org](http://www.socantscot.org) or find us on Bluesky [@socantscot.bsky.social](https://bsky.social/@socantscot).

## Chapter 10

# EILEAN MÓR EXCAVATIONS ON THE SPINE OF THE ISLAND

### Trench 6 (Illus 10.1–3, Table 10.1)

Trench 6 was positioned with its long axis approximately on a north-west to south-east line and was 10 by 5m. It was opened in 1991 to ascertain the relationship between building S and the adjacent stretch of bank, and to test whether this bank was the continuation of the timberwork defence enclosing the northern portion of Eilean Mór, a stretch of which was

sectioned in trench 3. Unsuspected prior to the commencement of digging was a substantial paved roadway on a line connecting the chapel with the great hall and evidence for a structure, labelled as 6.1, interpreted as a wooden watch tower of the 16th century. A substantial medieval midden was also encountered.

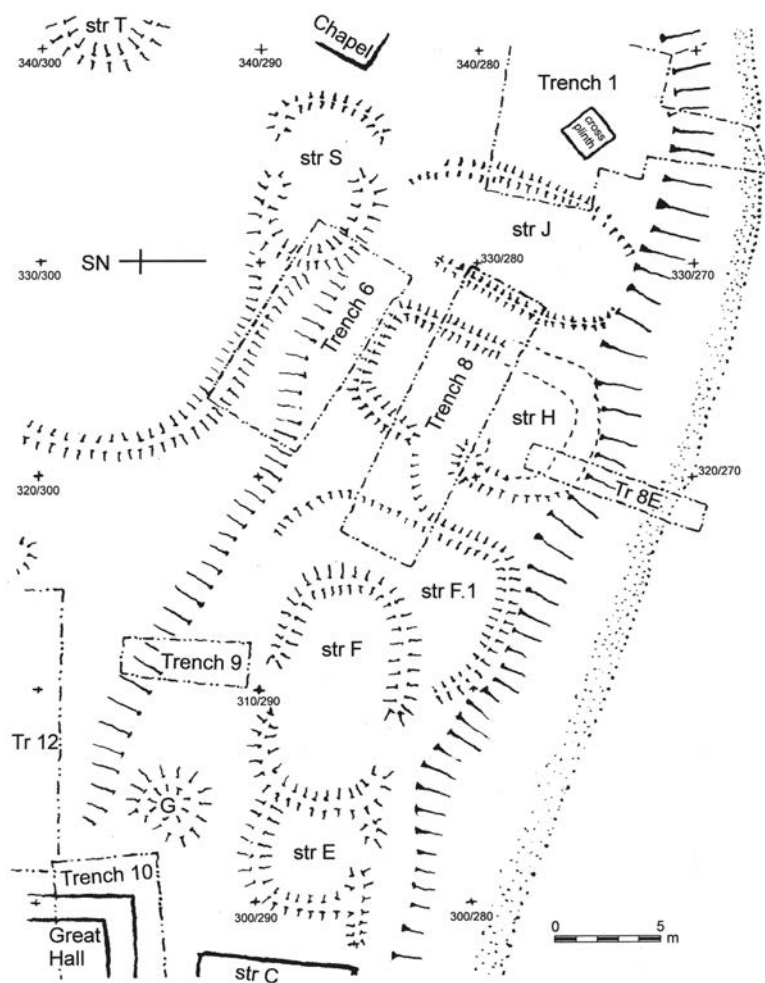


Illustration 10.1  
Location map for trenches 6, 8 and 9



Illustration 10.2  
Trench 6, main features exposed under the turf and topsoil



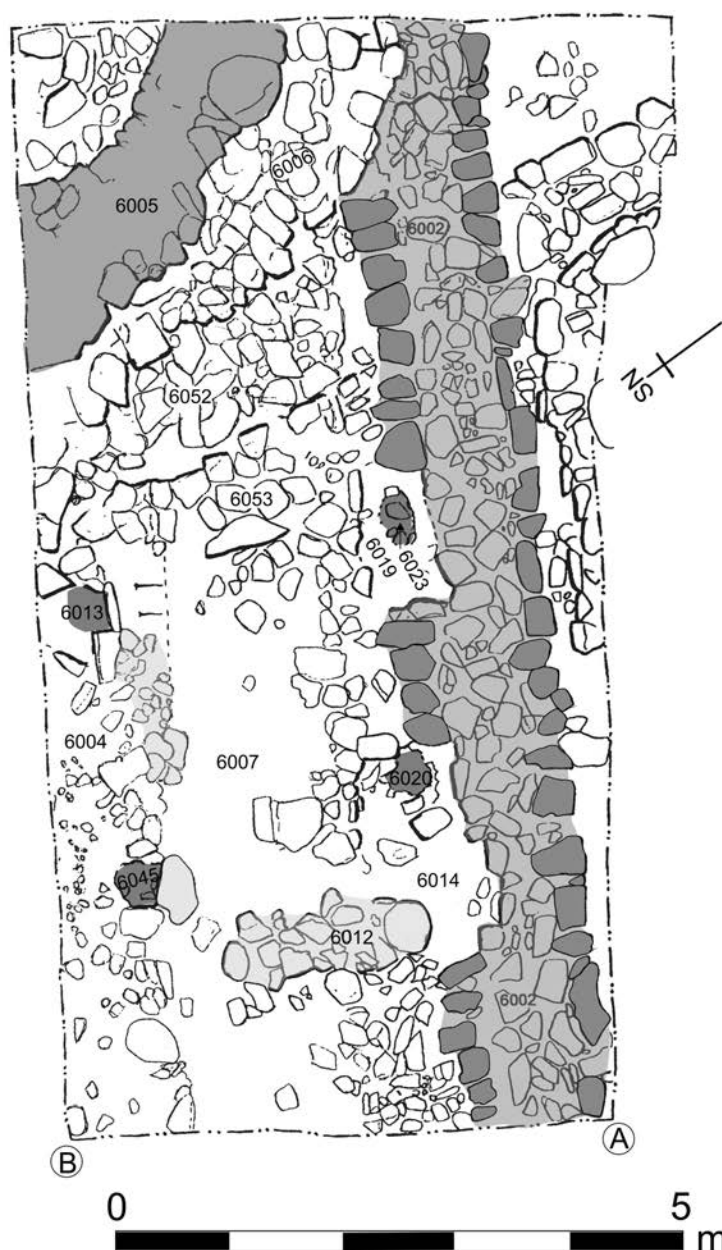


Illustration 10.3

Trench 6, plan showing the corner post-holes of structure 6.1 and house S

Extending over much of the trench was a gravel horizon [6018], largely the result of earthworm activity. It was apparent that it was the same phenomenon encountered in the burial ground in trench 1 as 1007. It was as much as 10cm deep in the hollow between the bank and the road, and here was sandwiched between a build-up of humus [6007] above and midden [6022] below. It also extended over the palisade bank and the surface of the road, but under tumble [6052] outward from the wall of house S. From it were recovered several small finds, including a Jew's harp (F53). The most significant from a dating point of view were two late 15th-century groats of James III (N32, N33), on the basis of their condition unlikely to have been lost any later than the early 16th century.

#### *Buildings S and S.1, and structure 6.1 (Illus 10.2–5)*

From surface indications, building S appeared prior to excavation as a sub-rectangular structure with rounded corners and, probably, opposed entrances in its longer sides. It measured about 8 by 6m overall, and lay contiguous to the end wall of the chapel and only slightly lower than it. Only a small segment of it was included in trench 6, but it was clear from this that its walls [6005] were of drystone construction, up to 1.7m thick at their base. The outer face had up to two courses in place, of massive boulders, with a distinct batter, while the inner face was composed of smaller stones. The wall core was of rubble. The stones used in the construction of building S were all of local origin, quarried (but not dressed) rather than boulders. The main types were quartzite and Port Askaig tillite, with occasional blocks of limestone.

Within trench 6 the wall of S, a metre or more in thickness, stood to a maximum height of 0.7m. Wrapped around its exterior was a series of rubble tips [6006, 6052, 6053], resulting from the collapse outwards of its walls, and possibly an earlier structure as well, a putative house S.1. The uppermost tumble [6006] spread over the surface of the adjacent cobbled road. The interior of building S was also much encumbered with tumble [6051], with voids, a growth of nettles and moss over some of the stones. As with other drystone houses on the island, there was no evidence for a laid floor. A firm floor surface [6016] was provided in this case by the flattened and levelled remains of an earlier wall, running north-east to south-west, with one face coinciding with the south-east end of the trench. Incorporated in it was a large post-setting, about 40cm across, defined by a stone surround [6017] (Illus 10.6). This was not fully excavated but might be interpreted as more evidence for another building (S.1) the other side of the main road to house J. Alternatively, it might have been a continuation of structure 6.2.

No finds or dating evidence were recovered from house S, but it seemed likely it belonged to the 16th century like the other drystone structures on Eilean Mór which encumbered the medieval remains.

Structure 6.1 was identified on the basis of four large post-holes with rectangular settings arranged in a square, giving an overall size for the structure of about 2.6 by 3m. Post-hole 6045 was



Illustration 10.4

Trench 6, view looking north-west with paved road and tumbled remains of structure S in right foreground



## EILEAN MÓR EXCAVATIONS ON THE SPINE OF THE ISLAND

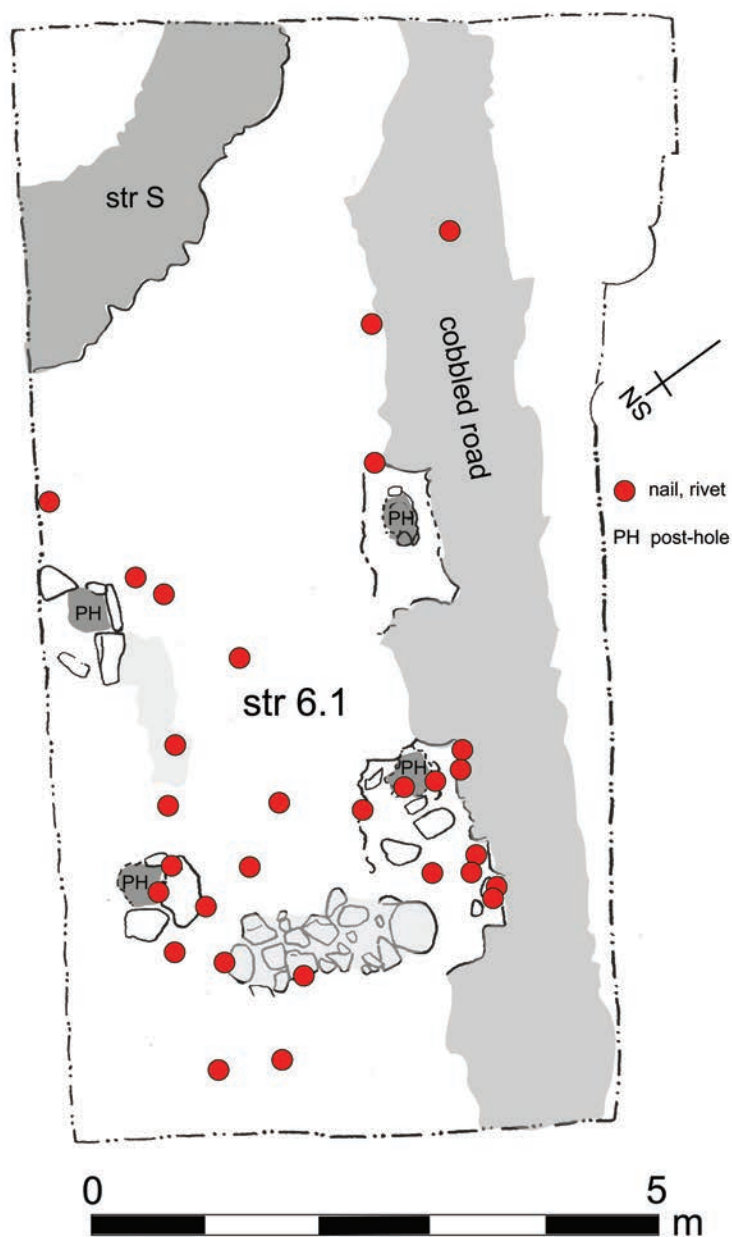


Illustration 10.5  
Trench 6, distribution of nails and rivets associated with structure 6.1

cut into the stone revetment of the palisade bank, and was about 40cm square and 26cm deep. There was an iron nail (SF 6109) in its fill. Post-hole 6013 was dug through the top of the palisade bank. It was rectangular in shape, its south side defined by a massive slab of Port Askaig tillite. It was over 40cm across and 32cm deep.

The other two post-holes of structure 6.1 pierced the earlier cobbled road. Post-hole 6020 was 31 by 29cm, and 38cm deep from the top of the road surface. The fill of sandy silt [6020] contained a large iron rivet (SF 6046) which would have clenched boards with a combined thickness of as much as an inch (25.4mm). There was also a large lump of iron slag (SF 6047) at the bottom, perhaps placed there deliberately as a protection for the timber upright supported in the hole, helping to draw moisture from it and prevent rotting. Post-hole 6023 was oval in shape at the top,

with stone packers defining a rectangular shape about 35 by 31cm and a depth of 41cm below the road surface. There was a large centrally place stone at its bottom.

The creation of these two post-holes involved the removal of cobbles and kerbstones from the road, creating two rectangular areas, 6037 and 6041, backfilled with humic earth [6019, 6014]. Some of the uplifted cobbles were reused with other stones to form the rectangular arrangement of stones [6012], about 3 by 0.6m, interpreted as the remains of a plinth or a step outside the north-west side of structure 6.1.

Spread around the structure 6.1 post-holes, in their fills and in the overlying gravel spread [6018] were over 20 nails and a few broken rivets, possibly all from the demolition of structure 6.1.

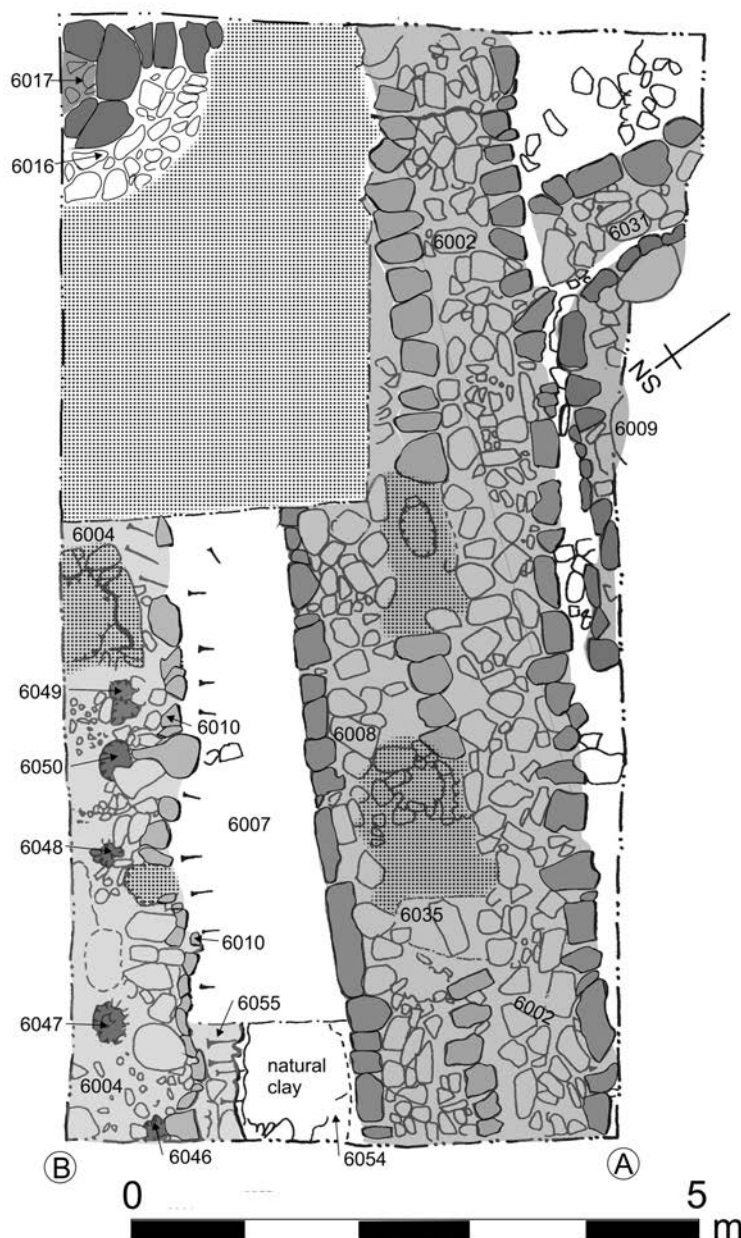


Illustration 10.6  
Trench 6, showing the palisade bank and paved road



Illustration 10.7

Trench 6, view showing the cobbled road sloping down into midden deposits and tumble round the exterior of the wall of building S

#### *The road and building H (Illus 10.4, 10.6, 10.7)*

The well-preserved cobbled surface of the road lay immediately under the turf and topsoil. It ran along the edge of the spine of the island adjacent to the series of buildings J, H and F, joining the chapel to the great hall. It was up to 2.4m wide but only the 1m wide strip [6002] adjacent to building H was level. The rest [6008] sloped down at an angle of 15° or more from the horizontal. This may have been the unforeseen consequence of laying the road partially over yielding deposits of earlier midden. A point to note is that there was a distinct break up the centre of the road formed by an alignment of stones that had the appearance of being an earlier kerb [6003]. It is therefore possible that the road was constructed in two stages, the strip nearer H only being added once

the other had started to sink. We have, however, judged that 6002 along with kerb 6003 (and a matching kerb adjacent to house H) was the original road and that 6008 was an addition. Part of our reason for this conclusion is that the kerb of 6008 was so different in character from the others. It was neater, and formed of generally narrower rectangular blocks.

The full width of the road was composed of a single course of flat stones of various local types, roughly uniform in size, but with a few small packers. The majority were of Port Askaig tillite with lesser quantities of limestone, epidiorite and other rocks. Near the south-east end of the trench there appeared to be a straight joint in the road, perhaps marking the threshold or gate into the graveyard. Within the hole [6041] cut for one of the posts of structure 6.1 the cobbles could be seen to be lying on a bed of gravel [6021]. A small sondage dug to a depth of 40cm beneath this gravel bed encountered dark grey-brown humic earth [6035], apparently a continuation of midden 6022. A large pitched rock was also encountered.

Just clipped by the trench's south-west baulk was the end of building H [6009], adjacent to the south edge of the road. It appeared probable that the road was aligned with the building rather than the other way around. Only the exterior wall face of house H and its rounded north-east corner were revealed. The wall stood two courses high. It was composed of quarried blocks of stone, mostly Port Askaig tillite. A paved path [6031] ran from the main road between it and building J. It was about 80cm wide and composed mostly of flat pieces of Port Askaig tillite.

#### *Structure 6.2 and a midden (Illus 10.6–8)*

The remains of the bank [6004] for supporting a palisade – structure 6.2 – ran approximately north-west to south-east (Illus 10.6, 10.7). Its inner, north-east-facing side lay outside the trench, but prior to excavation it appeared to be about 1.5m wide and about

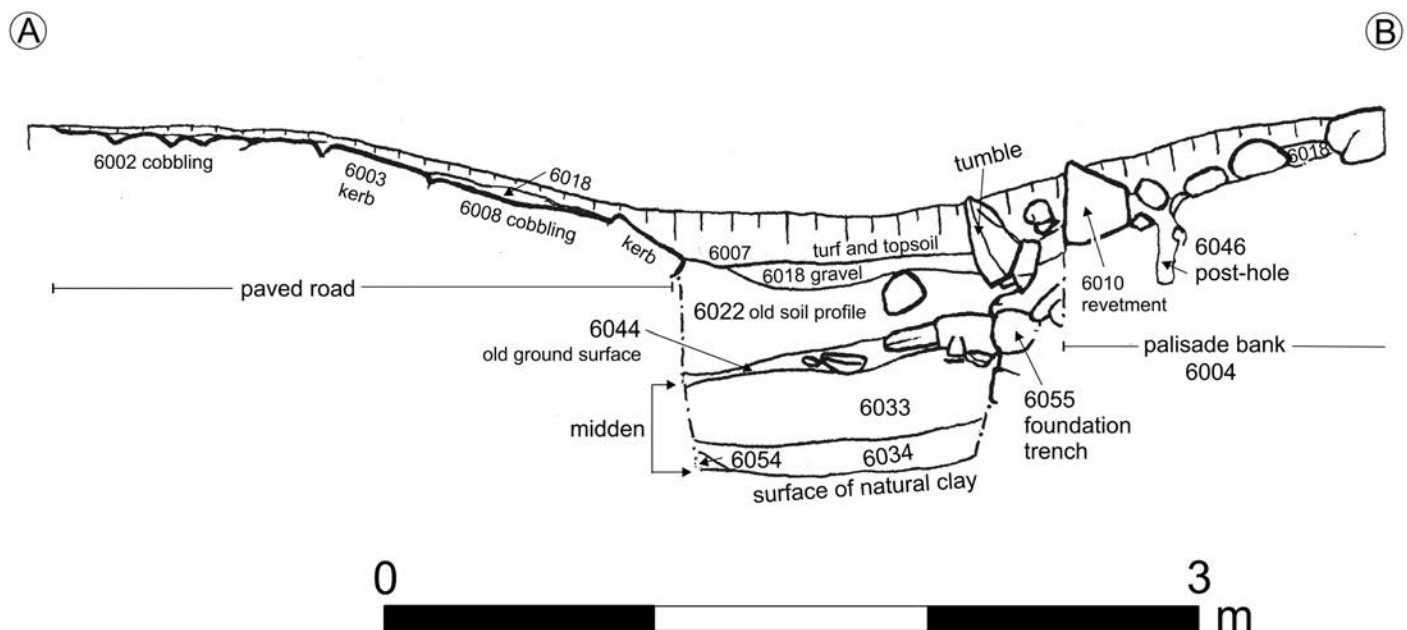


Illustration 10.8

Trench 6, section A-B facing south-east along the trench edge



# EILEAN MÓR EXCAVATIONS ON THE SPINE OF THE ISLAND

Context	Description	Interpretation
6002	Laid boulders and blocks	Paved road
6003	Line of laid stones	Kerb of 6002
6004	Silty clay	Bank for supporting palisade
6005	Laid stones	Wall, str S
6006	Stones	Tumble from str S
6007	Humic soil	Subsoil
6008	Laid boulders and blocks	Paved road
6009	Laid stones	Wall, str H
6010	Laid stones	Revetment of 6004 bank
6012	Laid stones	Plinth or step, str 6.1
6013	Cut	Post-hole, str 6.1
6014	Humic soil	Fill of 6041
6016	Stones	Floor, str S / wall, str S.1
6017	Stones	Post-setting, str S.1
6018	Gravel spread	Worm activity
6019	Humic soil	Fill of 6037
6020	Cut	Post-hole, str 6.1
6021	Gravel spread	Bedding for road 6002
6022	Sandy silt, charcoal, ash	Midden
6023	Cut	Post-hole, str 6.1
6031	Laid stones	Path between str H & J
6033	Sandy silt, charcoal, ash	Midden
6034	Grey silt	Midden
6035	Humic soil	Midden, equivalent to 6022
6036	Grey silt	Old ground surface
6037	Cut	For post-hole 6023, str 6.1
6041	Cut	For post-hole 6020, str 6.1
6042	Grey-white clay	Natural
6044	Stones in humic soil	Old ground surface
6045	Cut	Post-hole, str 6.1
6046	Cut	Post-hole for palisade
6047	Cut	Post-hole for palisade
6048	Cut	Post-hole for palisade
6049	Cut	Post-hole for palisade
6050	Cut	Post-hole for palisade
6051	Stones	Tumble from str S
6052	Stones	Tumble from str S
6053	Stones	Tumble from str S
6054	Ash, charcoal	Midden
6055	Sandy silt, stones	Fill of foundation trench 6056
6056	Cut	Foundation trench for 6004

Table 10.1  
Trench 6 contexts

50cm high. Excavation demonstrated that its outer, south-west-facing side had three or four courses of stonework [6010] forming a vertical face above the level of a foundation trench [6056]. The bank itself was of earth and contained post-holes for timber uprights. A series of five [6046, 6047, 6048, 6050, 6049] were identified in the 5.5m stretch excavated adjacent to building S. They were placed at irregular intervals, but further excavation of 6004 might possibly have led to the recognition of more. All were set with stones to hold the posts upright, were from 35cm to over 40cm in depth and could hold posts with a diameter of 8 to 15cm. A deposit of grey clay [6042] under the earth core of the bank was cut through by one of the post-holes [6013] of structure 6.1. It was presumed to be the underlying natural.

A knife in two pieces (F62) was recovered from post-hole 6046. Two pieces of daub (SF 6144) from the stone face of the bank retained impressions of withies, perhaps a clue that the palisade was wattled. Sherds of wheel-made pottery (reduced gritty) confirmed that the bank was no earlier in date than the 12th century. More significant from a dating point of view for the construction of the bank was a carved piece of grey-yellow sandstone (R30), the lower part of a human head, perhaps from the end of a hood moulding, incorporated into it. It was clearly from a prestigious building destroyed or altered prior to the construction of the timberwork. The choice would appear to be limited to the great hall, believed to have been dismantled at the very end of the 15th century, or else the nearby chapel which may have remained in use well into the 16th century.

Underlying the gravel horizon 6018 between the bank and the road and extending underneath the latter was a midden deposit [6022]. Its full depth was only observed in a 1m wide sondage cut at the north-west end of the trench (Illus 10.8). Here it was 42cm thick adjacent to the road, thinning to 10cm up against the face of the bank. It was dark brown sandy silt with grit and pebbles, fragments of charcoal and patches of peat ash. Animal bone was present but mostly in too poor a state of preservation for easy recovery. Nineteen sherds of pottery included one of redware (SF 6156) and another of oxidised gritty ware (SF 6117). There were several nails, including one, F46, identifiable as a 'fiddle-key' type of horseshoe nail, current from the 11th to the 13th century. The ironwork also included a small scale-tang knife (F61), and a barbed arrowhead (F31) of a type datable to the mid-13th century. There was a stone counter or playing piece (R71) and a piece of a type A roof slate (SF 6157).

Midden 6022 may have formed over a long period of time, and clearly the presence within it of medieval artefacts is suggestive of a process that started in that period. Perhaps, however, the most significant find from the point of view of dating was the roof slate. As we have argued elsewhere in this volume, roof slates were only likely to have ended up in middens and other contexts after the buildings that they covered had been destroyed or dismantled. In the case of Finlaggan that would mean about 1500 at earliest. The formation of midden 6022 as late as the early 16th century is consistent with the presence of groats of James III in the overlying wormed horizon [6018].

Beneath midden 6022 was a thin spread of stones in an earth matrix similar to 6022. This was labelled as 6044 and identified as an old ground surface overlying yet more midden deposits. It may either have represented an attempt to consolidate the ground surface or a

temporary cessation in the activities which had caused the midden to accumulate. The underlying midden deposit [6033] had a maximum depth of 30cm and was similar in character to midden 6022 but more variable in colour, indicating successive tips. Deposit 6033 gave on to 6034, the same midden, but greyer and siltier in character with a maximum thickness of 13cm. A wedge of red ash and charcoal [6054] under it may have represented a different episode, but too little of it was exposed for further comment. From 6034 was recovered a strap handle of partially reduced gritty ware (SF 6163).

Midden 6034 and 6054 gave on to a deposit of grey silt [6036] overlying the natural grey-green silty clay. It represented an earlier ground surface.

#### *Interpretation (Illus 10.9)*

The cobbled road with kerb stones that stretched the length of trench 6 has been identified as part of a medieval system, in this case connecting the chapel with the great hall. The lack of debris or soil build-up over its surface suggested that it was maintained

and remained in use into post-medieval times, beyond a time when the adjacent medieval building H, on the basis of excavations in trench 8, was in ruins. Although tumble from building S spread over the road, the structure itself seems to have been placed to keep the road open, or at least that side of it which was not slipping down into the midden.

The supposed palisade bank [6004] turned out to be that, with a presumption based on stratigraphy and finds that it was constructed in the 16th century. Its stratigraphic relationship with building S, or a putative earlier structure S.1, was not established, but it appeared likely that the bank was earlier than structure S.

Clearly later than the erection of the bank, and perhaps of similar date to building S, was structure 6.1. Its construction would have left the main part of the road open and perhaps have provided an entrance through the palisade to the enclosure beyond. It may represent the remains of a wooden watch tower. It was on the highest available piece of ground on the island, outside the burial ground. The plinth [6012] might have been a step providing access or supporting a ladder.

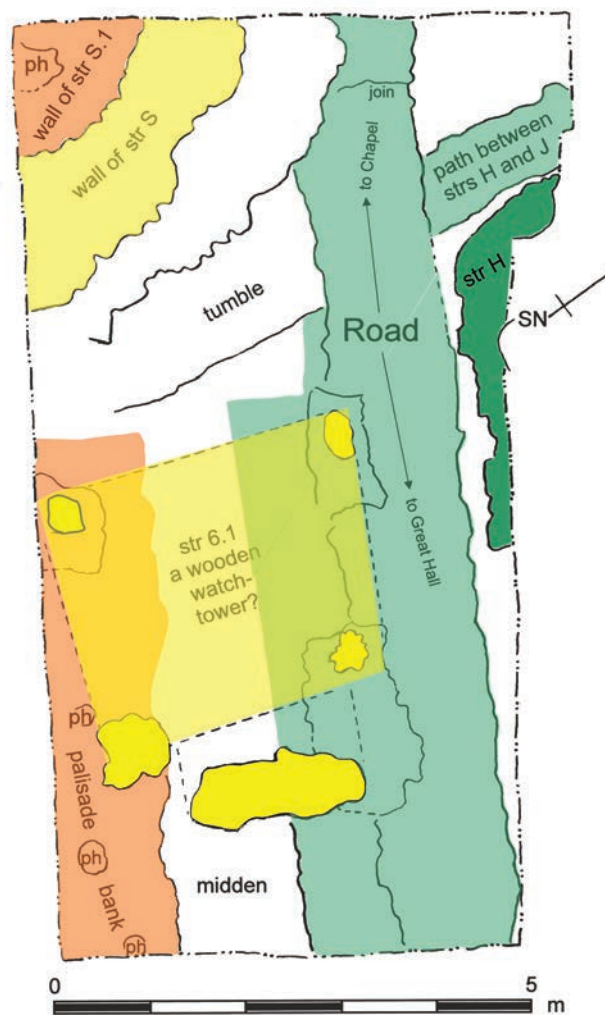


Illustration 10.9  
Trench 6, composite interpretative plan of main features



Illustration 10.10  
Trench 8, view looking south-east, with main features exposed under the turf and topsoil



# EILEAN MÓR EXCAVATIONS ON THE SPINE OF THE ISLAND

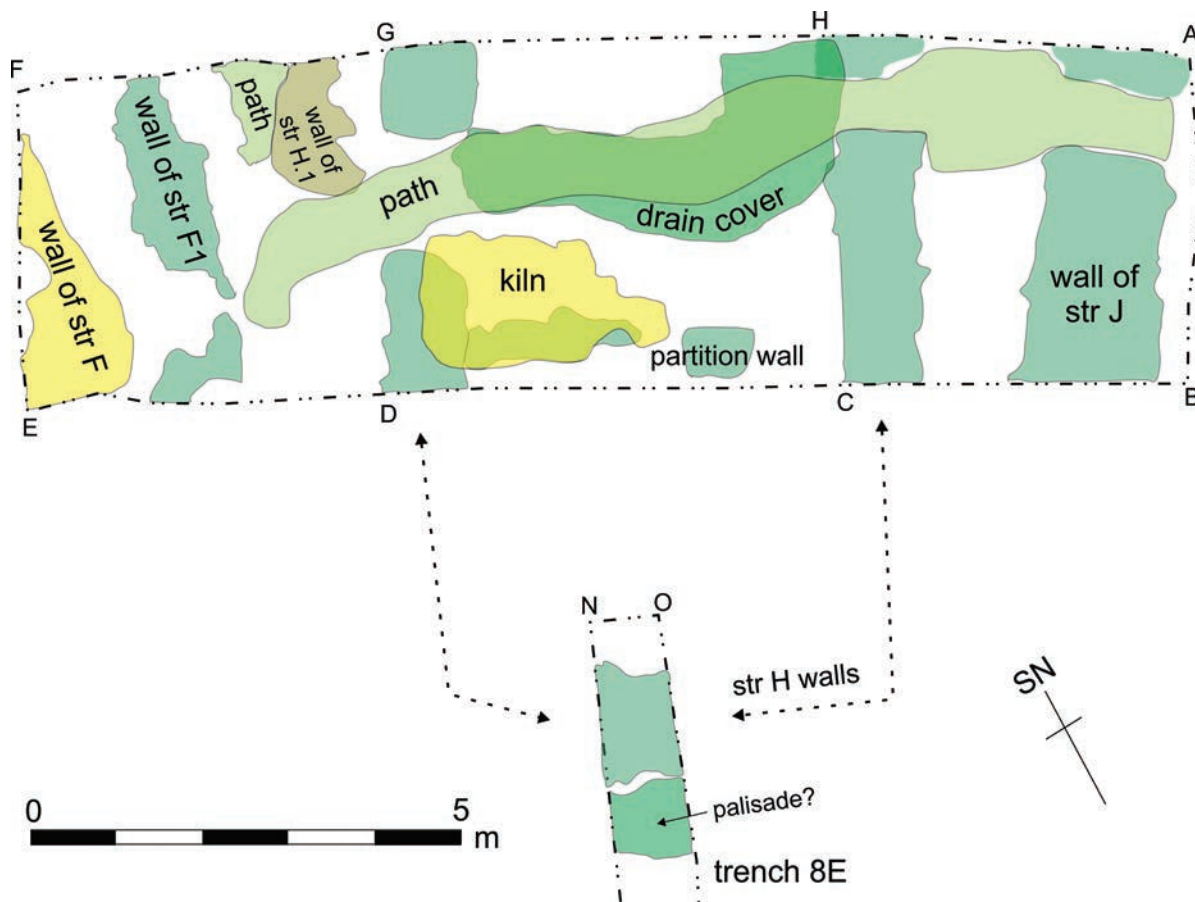


Illustration 10.11  
Trench 8, composite interpretative plan of some features

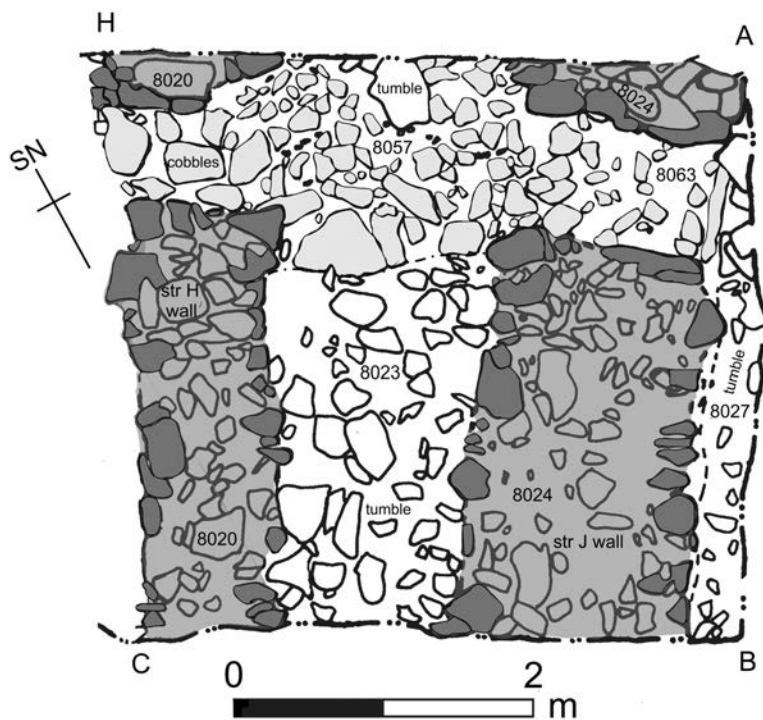


Illustration 10.12  
Trench 8, plan of south-east end with alley between buildings H and J



Illustration 10.13  
Trench 8, south-east end looking south-east. The large block of limestone at bottom left is probably a lintel for the doorway in the east wall of structure H



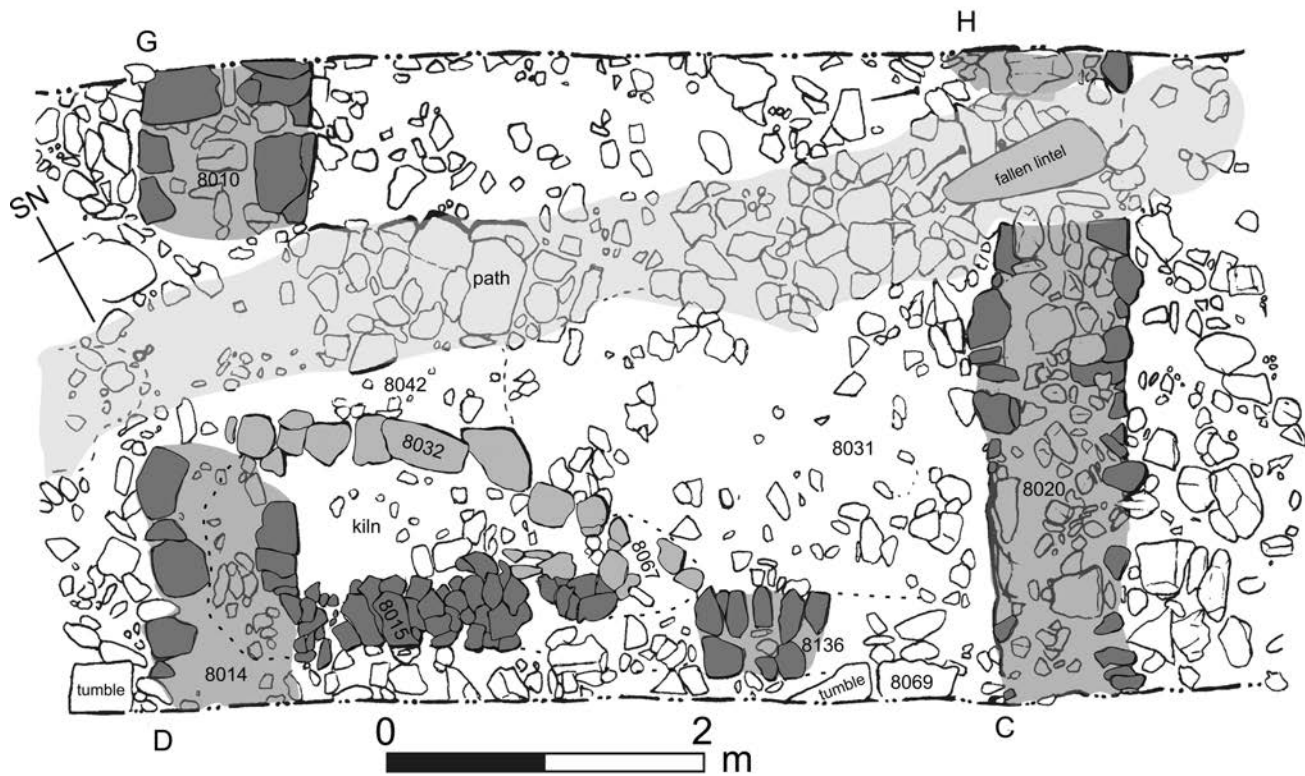


Illustration 10.14  
Trench 8, plan of structure H with later kiln



Illustration 10.15  
Trench 8, view from north-west looking across the excavated area of structure H

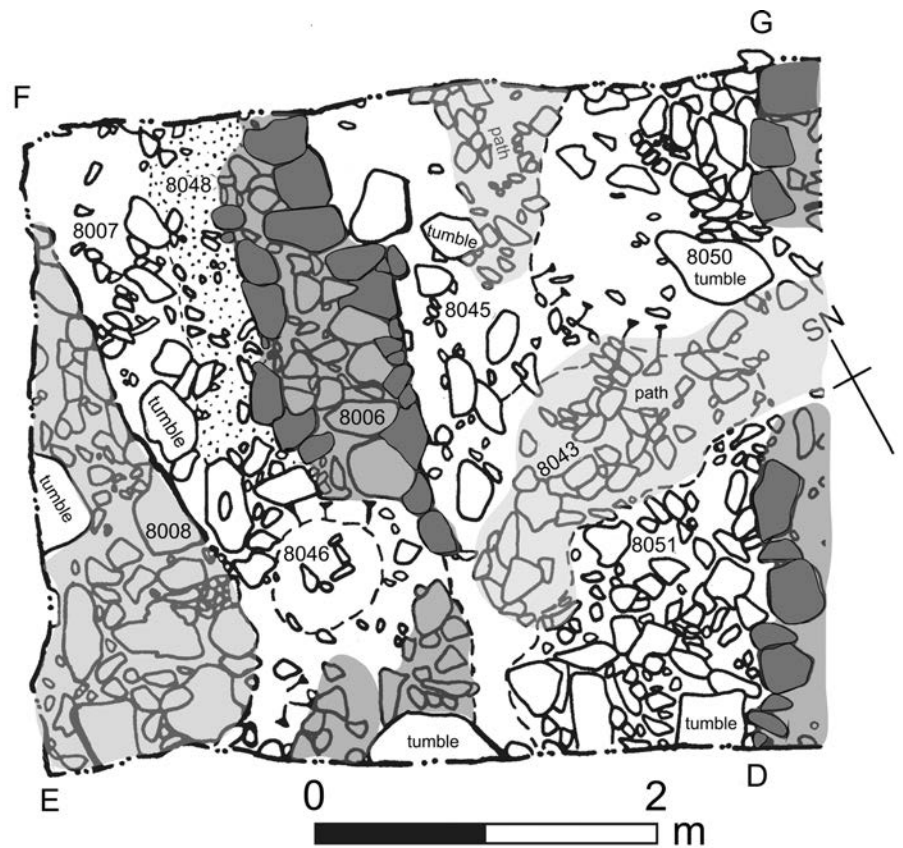


Illustration 10.16  
Trench 8, plan of north-west segment of trench with walls belonging to structures F and F1



Illustration 10.17  
Trench 8, view of north-west segment of trench looking south-east



**Trenches 8 and 8E (Illus 6.12, 10.1, 10.10–12, Table 10.2)**

Trench 8 was laid out in 1992 with its main axis running north-west to south-east through building H. It was 14m long by 4m wide. At the end of the 1992 season it was deemed necessary to carry on the excavation of this trench for a further season in order to achieve the objectives initially set. The central area within the walls of building H was covered with polythene before backfilling, and this was the area re-examined in 1993, with a small eastwards extension to take in the alley between H and J and the doorway of building J.

Trench 8E (Illus 10.1, 10.23, 10.24) was laid out in 1993 down the side of the island adjacent to the end of building H, right to the water's edge. The trench was later extended to take in the end wall of building H, but it was thought inappropriate to join it up with trench 8 in order not to remove any more of the deposits associated with that building. The trench was 1 by 8m and was expected to answer the question whether this side of the island had any artificial defences.

It was anticipated that building H would turn out to be one of a series of medieval structures, in this case relatively unencumbered with later houses or debris, aligned along the edge of the paved road leading from the great hall to the chapel. An opportunity seemed to be presented to look at an edifice of this period that was not obviously ceremonial or official in character. The trench was positioned so that H's relationship to adjacent structures – J and F1 – could also be explored. It was thought that this area of Eilean Mór, the ridge extending from the chapel to building C, was more likely to be viewed as an attractive setting for buildings at an early date than the more low-lying fringes of the island, and if we were to recover any evidence of occupation earlier than the 14th century this was the best place to look for it.

Removal of turf and topsoil from trench 8 revealed considerable spreads of tumbled stonework covering the whole area of the trench. It was only after much patient cleaning and recording that the main features were discerned.

**Post-medieval activity? (Illus 10.14)**

Through a gap in the ruined north-west wall of H ran a path, sloping down south-westwards between H and F1 to the shore. Here it formed a muddy gully [8043], partially hollowed out by feet and the outflow of the drain in building H on its way to the loch. Pieces of stone may have been pressed into it from time to time to make it less slippery.

A kiln, triangular in shape, about 1.6 by 2.0m, was erected within building H, apparently when the latter was already abandoned and roofless, since it overlapped the main external wall of building H and was built over the stub of an internal partition wall [8136] (Illus 10.19). This wall survived only two courses high, with other blocks of stone [8015] added in the course of constructing the kiln. The kiln's north-east wall [8032] was composed of a single row, remaining only one course high, of blocks of phyllite and limestone resting on the floor of H [8031]. At the apex of the kiln a hollow [8068] full of peat ash marked the position of the fire. It was oval in shape, about 90 by 45cm, with a depth of 13cm. A truncated post-hole [8084], 14cm in diameter, in its base probably dated to an earlier phase of activity. Inside the

main part of the kiln and overlying the floor of H was a thin layer of clay silt with fragments of charcoal and flecks of ash [8040].

This kiln presumably served for drying corn. A soil sample from the tumble and black clayey silt within the ruined walls of building H produced carbonised oats (*Avena*) and wheat (*Triticum sp.*). A number of nails, and an iron object (F106) tentatively identified as the foot for a gridiron for supporting the grain that had to be dried, were also recovered. The upper stone of a rotary quern (R88) was recovered nearby in the muddy gully 8043. An awl (F89), still with its wooden handle, was also found here.

**Buildings J and H (Illus 10.12–15)**

The north-west wall of J [8024], reduced to its bottommost course, had a width of about 1.4m. Its stones were all of local origin, undressed blocks of quartzite and limestone and water-washed boulders, varying in size from about 10 to 50cm across. It was pierced by an entranceway, about 80cm wide, opposite the entranceway in the south-east wall exposed in trench 1. There appeared to be a sill stone at the inner end of the entrance within trench 8. Too little of the interior of J was included in this trench to be fully excavated. It was choked with rubble and clay silt [8027] from its collapse and abandonment. In overall size the building had a width of just over 6m and a probable length of about 12m. Pieces of type A roof slates here and in trench 1 suggest that it had a slate roof.

Between buildings J and H there was an alley about 1.5m wide where the entrance to H opposed that in J. The alley was clogged with tumbled stonework and silty clay containing pieces of charcoal and lenses of peat ash overlying crude cobbling [8057] extending into the two entrances. This was the continuation of the paved path [6031] uncovered in trench 6.

Before excavation the low stone walls of H were clearly discernible underneath their covering of tussocky grass. The structure was rectangular with rounded corners, measuring about 12 by 7m overall. The doorway in the south-east wall was 65cm wide. A slab of limestone, 110 by 38 by 12cm, possibly its lintel, was found tumbled in the entranceway (Illus 10.13). The walls survived, at most, three courses above floor level, but the exterior of the south-west end wall [8060] in trench 8E had nine courses revetting the edge of the island (Illus 10.23, 10.24). The material used for them was all local rock, almost all quartzite and limestone, without any mortar. The blocks were mostly roughly dressed or cleaved naturally to give a straight-sided face, and most were less than 50 by 20cm.

The south-west end wall was over 1m in thickness. The side walls varied from about 1 to 0.8m. They appear to have been carefully constructed, being founded in shallow trenches. The foundation trench 8129 (Illus 10.24, trench 8E) for the south-west end wall was about 40cm wide in the interior of the building, with a depth of about 17cm. It was fully excavated for a length of about 60cm, within which the cuts for two post-holes [8128, 8132], possibly of earlier date, could be traced. The former was 23cm in diameter and 12cm deep from the base of the trench, while the latter was 34cm across but only 4cm deep. From the fill of this trench [8061] were recovered some sherds of handmade pottery identified as of prehistoric date (SF 8361), and two sherds of partially reduced gritty ware. The foundation trench [8112] for



the south-east wall (Illus 10.22) was 22cm wide internally. At its most complete it narrowed to 11cm at a depth of 17cm. Its fill of clay silt [8109] included several pieces of stone, a piece of slag and also a sherd of partially reduced gritty pottery.

A foundation trench [8121] for the north-west wall was located, but not excavated. It was about 20cm wide internally, only present towards the south-west end of the wall. Here the wall [8014] had a core of clay silt [8052] overlying a thin layer of turf or earlier ground surface [8122]. It is possible that the wall was set on the truncated remains of an earlier bank, with only its facing stones founded in trench 8121. Towards its north-east end the wall was supported on a turf bank [8044] and a raft of rubble [8133], and the north corner and north-east of the building were levelled up with rubble [8081] and other material. This was because the underlying bedrock dipped in a line from H's east corner to the mid-point on its north-west wall.

From the tumble and debris in and around the ruins of building H in trench 8, and also from the area immediately adjacent to H's end wall in trench 6, were recovered over 200 pieces of type A roof slates and about 30 fragments of type B slate. This can be taken as evidence for the roof covering.

Underneath the path and kiln in building H was the earth floor [8031, 8035, 8062] in use when the building still had a roof on it. It was of medium clayey silt, flecked with peat ash and charcoal. No trace of it was observed in the small internal area of H excavated in trench 8E, presumably due to erosion at the cliff edge. Running north-west to south-east through building H, and dividing it approximately into two halves, was the internal partition wall [8136] already referred to in the description of the kiln. It sat on the floor surface and was probably inserted at some point after the initial erection of the building.

A drain [8115], partially cut into the underlying bedrock, ran north-west to south-east across the internal area of building H, about 1.5m to the north-east of wall 8136 (Illus 10.18, 10.19, 10.20). It was about 17cm wide and about 20cm deep from its bottom to the top of its capstones, and was filled with silty grey clay [8111]. It most probably flowed out under H's north-west wall and down towards the loch, but began adjacent to the south-east door jamb as a small basin, 17 by 27cm. It had been capped with thin slabs of phyllite [8098] (not reused roof slates), but these had obviously not worn well and had been replaced by substantial slabs of quartzite and limestone [8033, 8034], partially supported on side slabs of the same rock types, forming a strip of paving extending from the entrance across the width of the building. Another area of paving [8100] was added to it along the interior of the south-east wall and beyond the entrance.

From the interface between the floor and the tumble and detritus within and around building H were recovered several pieces of ironwork, including large quantities of nails, a few rivets, staples, a small pintle (F109), two hooks (F112, F113) and a key (F118), much of which may have derived from H's internal fittings. There were also sherds of one or more reduced gritty jugs, and several sherds of handmade pottery, apparently from small globular vessels with out-turned rims with diameters from about 8 to 14cm. They were mostly of fine clay with organics, several blackened from being heated in the fire. Other finds included a

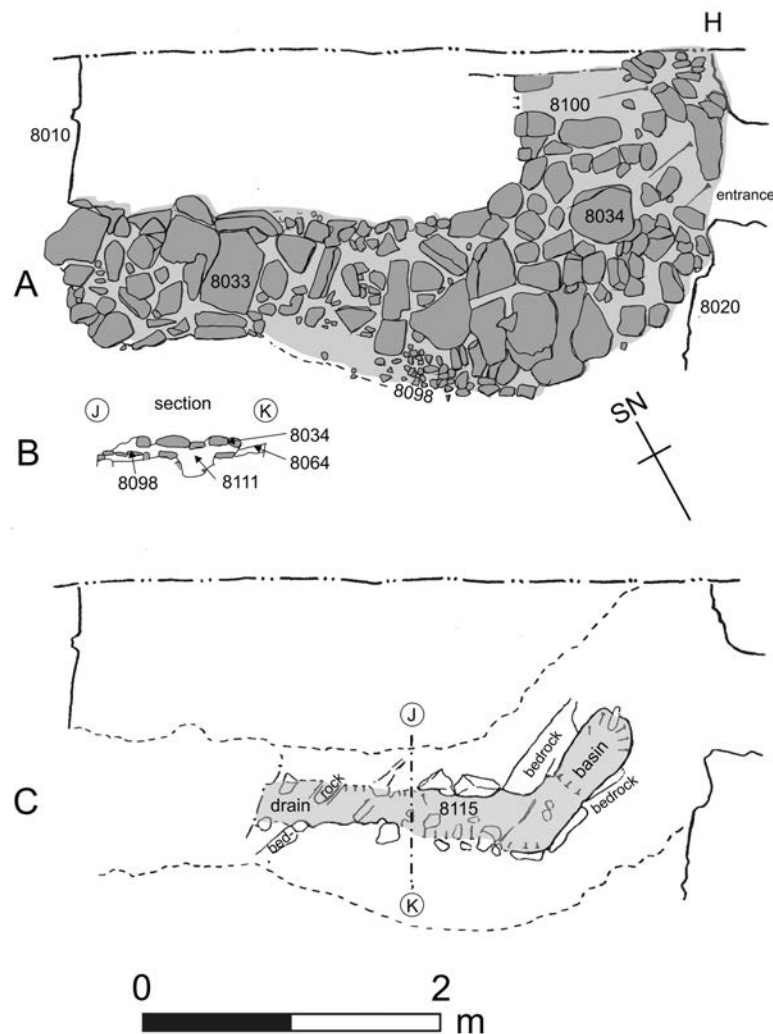


Illustration 10.18

Trench 8: (A) plan of drain with capstones in place; (B) section through drain; (C) plan with capstones removed



Illustration 10.19

Trench 8, structure H looking south-east, with the drain to the left of the far ranging-rod and the kiln to the right



Illustration 10.20

Trench 8, view of capstones of drain within structure H, looking south-east



Illustration 10.21

Trench 8, view with the remains of the wall of structure F1

whetstone (R93), a small decorated ring brooch (C4) and an arrowhead (F32) of military type. A slate scratched with a gaming board (R68) was found in the fill of the foundation trench for the south-east wall. Perhaps the most significant finds were several fragmentary horse teeth.

#### ***Buildings F1 and F (Illus 10.16, 10.17)***

To the north-west of building H part of the wall [8006] of structure F1 was encountered. Although the Royal Commission identified F1 as an enclosure in its survey of the island, it appeared more likely to be another house, similar in size and alignment to H and J, overlain by a later drystone house, building F. Only one course of wall 8008 remained in situ. It consisted mostly of pieces of quartzite and limestone and had a maximum width of 1m. The stretch uncovered in trench 8 was badly damaged, some of it robbed [8046, 8047], perhaps in connection with the later construction of building F.

At the west end of trench 8 part of the wall [8008] of house F was encountered, apparently a relatively late building erected within the ruins of house F1. RCAHMS planned it as a sub-rectangular structure with opposed-entrance doorways in its side walls, with an overall size of about 10 by 7m. The outer face of its wall within trench 8 was defined by a series of small blocks aligned on edge, and its core appeared to be of rubble. Tumble [8007] spread from it over a wormed, gravel horizon [8048], perhaps representing the top of occupation deposits in house F1.

#### ***Building H.1 (Illus 10.21, 10.22)***

Underlying building H there were traces of at least one earlier structure, probably a house, the flattened side walls of which served as a core for the north-west and south-east walls of house H. No trace was detected of a south-west end wall, possibly because it was cleared away in the building of house H. It could, however, remain to be found in the unexcavated area between trenches 8 and 8E. The bank [8044] which supports part of the north-west wall of H (Illus 10.16, 10.17) probably started off as

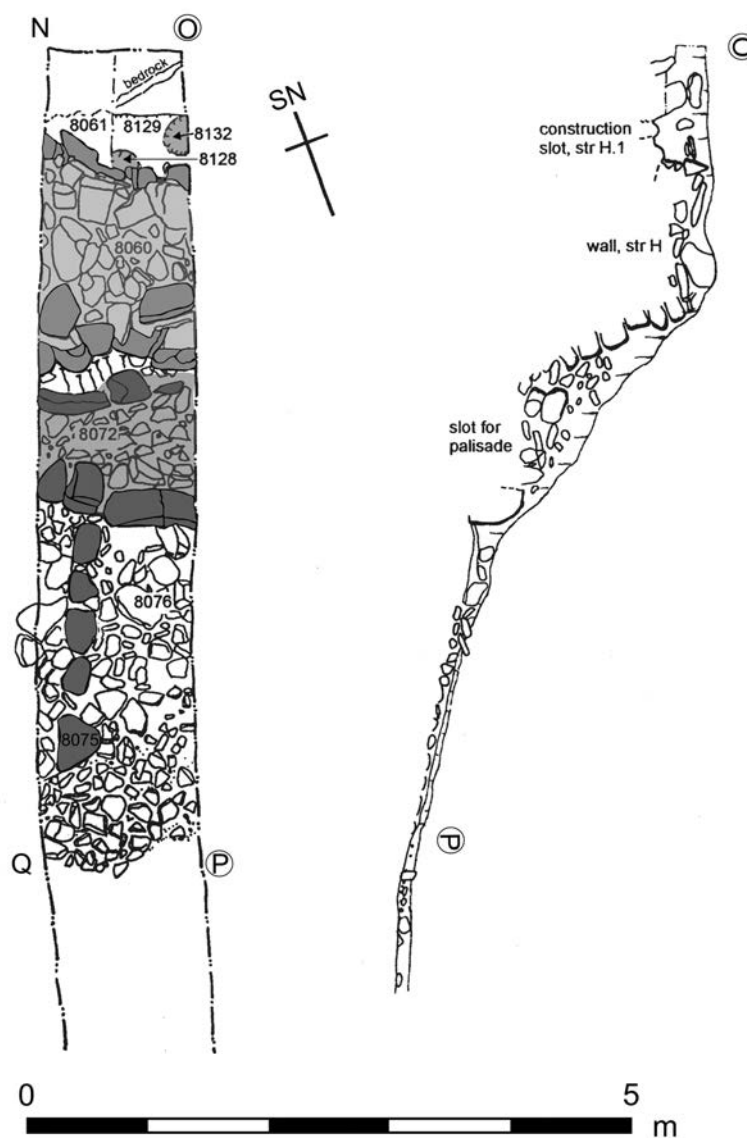
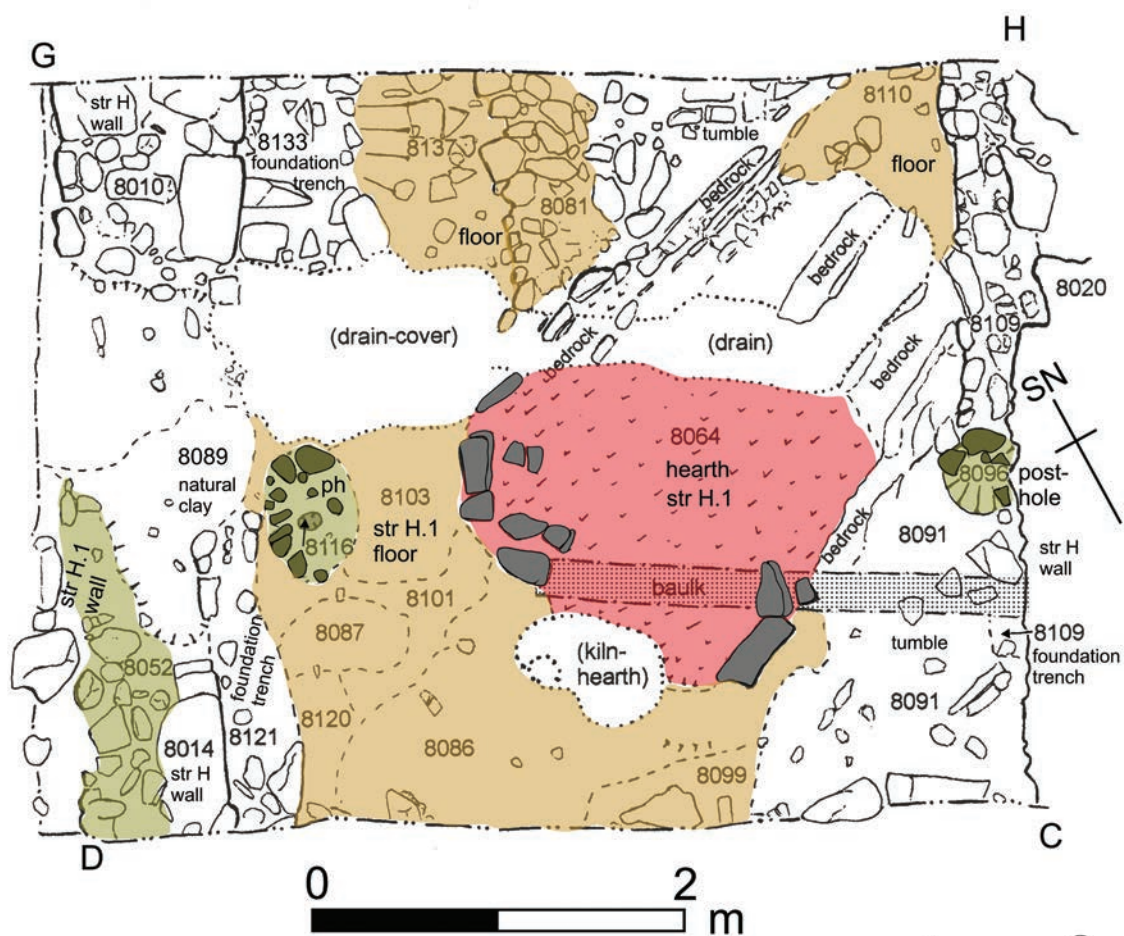
the turf wall of H.1. More of it was detected as 8052, a gritty clay silt in the core of this wall of house H. A post-hole, 8116, sealed by the floor of H was probably for supporting a cruck for the roof of H.1. It contained stone packers for its post and was 60cm in diameter at its mouth, narrowing in its lower portion to 23cm, with a total depth of 33cm. No post-pipe was observed in its fill [8114], but it included a sherd (SF 8442) of white gritty ware and three nails.

No trace was observed of the south-east wall of house H.1, presumably because the south-east wall of H was constructed over it. Another post-hole [8096] partially dug away by the foundation trench for H's south-east wall can be interpreted as for the matching roof cruck to that contained in post-hole 8116. It was circular, cut down into bedrock, with a diameter of 50cm narrowing to 30cm about 15cm down from its top. It had a total depth of about 28cm. Four angular stones were found inclining into its top, having obviously served to pack an upright timber, and a probable post-pipe [8093] of dark brown-black silt, about 16cm in diameter, was traced in a matrix of mottled mid-brown silty clay [8092].

A large hearth took up much of the area excavated within house H.1. It was represented by an area of peat ash up to 16cm deep [8064], lying in a shallow hollow cut in the limestone bedrock. It was partially removed by the structure H drain. This hearth was about 2m across and was probably defined by a kerb of stones. A fired clay sample from it was submitted to Mark Noel of GeoQuest Associates for archaeomagnetic dating, which indicated a date range of either AD 1080–1220 or AD 1440–1550. The earlier range is preferred on the basis of stratigraphy and finds.

Thin spreads of tumbled stone [8081, 8069] within the area of house H may be from stone facings to the turf walls of H.1. Several sherds of pottery were found in 8081, including reduced gritty and redware. Patchy, thin layers of clay and silt [8137, 8110, 8091, 8099] are all that remain of one or more floors for house H.1. Underlying these occupation deposits for house H.1 were the remains of an old ground surface [8134, 8135] overlying natural clay [8087, 8089] and bedrock.





# EILEAN MÓR EXCAVATIONS ON THE SPINE OF THE ISLAND

## Timberwork defence (Illus 10.23, 10.24)

Outside the end wall [8060] of building H, well down the steep slope to the shore, there was a construction slot [8072] 20cm wide, full of angular, pitched rubble, with voids in between, bounded front and back with kerbs. The risk of destabilising the end wall of house H prevented further excavation of this feature, but it seemed reasonable to suppose that it contained the footings of a wooden palisade.

On the foreshore outside this construction slot was an area of laid stones [8076], as much as 2m wide and tailing off on the shoreline as a result of erosion. One edge was defined by an alignment of large boulders [8075] running north-east to south-west from the front of slot 8072. These might tentatively be identified as the foundations of a defensive tower projecting from the palisade.

Context	Description	Interpretation
8006	Laid stones	Wall of str F1
8007	Stones	Tumble from wall of str F
8008	Laid stones	Wall of str F
8010	Laid stones	North-west wall of str H
8014	Laid stones	North-west wall of str H
8015	Laid stones	Wall of kiln
8020	Laid stones	South-east wall of str H
8023	Stones, clay silt	Debris in passage between H and J
8024	Laid stones	North-west wall of str J
8027	Stones, clay silt	Tumble in str J
8031	Clay silt, peat ash	Floor of str H
8032	Laid stones	Wall of kiln
8033	Laid stones	Stone capping of drain
8034	Laid stones	Stone capping of drain
8035	Clayey silt	Floor of str H
8040	Clay silt, peat ash	Fill in kiln
8042	Silty clay, charcoal	Floor of str H
8043	Peaty soil with stones	Muddy gulley
8044	Clay silt	Turf bank/wall of H.1
8045	Clay silt, stones, slates	Tumble from str H
8046	Peaty soil with stones	Pit dug into 8006?
8047	Peaty soil with stones	Robbed-out wall 8006
8048	Gravel in clay silt	Wormed horizon
8050	Stones, slates, silt	Tumble from wall of str H
8051	Stones, slates, silt	Tumble from wall of str H
8052	Gritty clay silt	Turf wall of str H.1
8057	Laid stones	Cobbling between str H and J
8060	Laid stones	South-west wall of str H
8061	Silty clay	Fill of foundation trench 8129
8062	Silty clay	Floor of str H
8063	Gap	Entrance in wall of str J
8064	Ash, clay silt	Hearth of str H.1
8067	Silt, burning, roof slate	Hearth of kiln
8068	Cut	Hearth for kiln
8069	Stones	Tumble from wall of str H.1
8072	Stones	Fill of palisade slot

## Interpretation (Illus 10.11)

The evidence for house H.1 was admittedly slender but was enough to add to the picture created from other trenches on Eilean Mór that the island was densely covered with buildings throughout the medieval period. House H.1 can be interpreted as a turf-walled house with central hearth and its open roof supported on crucks. The archaeomagnetic determination from its hearth suggested occupation some time from the late 11th to the early 13th century.

The supposed palisade slot in trench 8E is interpreted as part of the island's circuit of defences, dating to the 12th or 13th century. The palisade must have gone by the time building H was erected. It cannot be said whether, or to what extent, it overlapped in time with house H.1.

Context	Description	Interpretation
8075	Laid stones	Alignment of boulders
8076	Laid stones	Foundation for tower?
8081	Stones	Levelling for floor of str H
8084	Cut	Post-hole in base of 8068
8086	Clay silt	Floor of str H.1
8087	Grey-green clay	Natural clay
8089	Redeposited clay	Natural clay
8091	Clay silt	Floor of str H.1
8092	Mottled silty clay	Fill of 8096
8093	Silt	Post-pipe in 8096
8094	Clay	Disturbed natural
8096	Cut	Post-hole, str H.1
8098	Smashed phyllite	Earlier drain cover
8099	Silt	Floor of str H.1
8100	Laid stones	Stone capping of drain
8101	Silt	Floor of str H.1
8103	Clay silt	Floor of str H.1
8109	Stones, clay silt	Fill of 8112
8110	Clay silt	Floor of str H.1
8111	Silty clay	Fill of drain
8112	Cut	Foundation trench for wall 8020
8114	Silt, packing stones, etc	Fill of 8116
8115	Cut	Drain in str H
8116	Cut	Post-hole, str H.1
8120	Mottled silty clay	Floor of str H.1
8121	Stones, silt	Fill of foundation trench for 8014
8122	Gravelly silt	Old ground surface
8128	Cut	Post-hole in 8129
8129	Cut	Foundation trench for wall 8060
8132	Cut	Post-hole in 8129
8133	Laid stones	Foundation for wall 8010
8134	Dark silt	Old ground surface
8135	Dark gravelly silt	Old ground surface
8136	Laid stones	Partition wall in str H
8137	Clay silt	Floor of str H.1

Table 10.2  
Trench 8 contexts



Although there was no secure dating evidence for buildings H and J, it seemed reasonable to place them in the medieval period, perhaps the later part of the 15th century, and date their destruction or collapse to the end of the 15th century. The finds from the debris surrounding and encumbering their ruins all appeared to be medieval, and their exterior walls and doorways were aligned and connected with the medieval road system. Building F1, also medieval, could well date to about the same time as H and J.

Building H with its drain and horse teeth invites identification as a stable. The solidity of the walls – despite the lack of evidence for mortar – and the evidence for a slate roof suggest it could have been two stories high. Indeed, one might wonder if some of the finds, like the brooch and pottery, could have dropped from an upper floor. Many of the nails that were recovered may have been for securing timber floorboards as well as the sarking to support a slate roof.

Building J had more substantial walls than H, and like the latter probably had a slate roof. It too may have been two stories high. The two structures seem to belong together, with a door from J giving direct access into H. Excavation in trench 1 showed that J had another door giving access to the burial ground and chapel.

The kiln appeared to have been built within the flattened remains of house H. Perhaps in the 16th century this segment of Eilean Mór, bounded by the burial ground, the island edge, and houses S and F, was waste ground.

#### Trench 9 (Illus 10.1, 10.25, 10.26, Table 10.3)

Trench 9 was dug in 1992 on the north edge of the main spine of Eilean Mór as part of the same campaign that saw the initial laying out of trench 12 a few metres to the north. It measured 2 by 6.5m with its long axis running north–south. Before removal of the



Illustration 10.25  
Trench 9, looking south, after removal of the turf

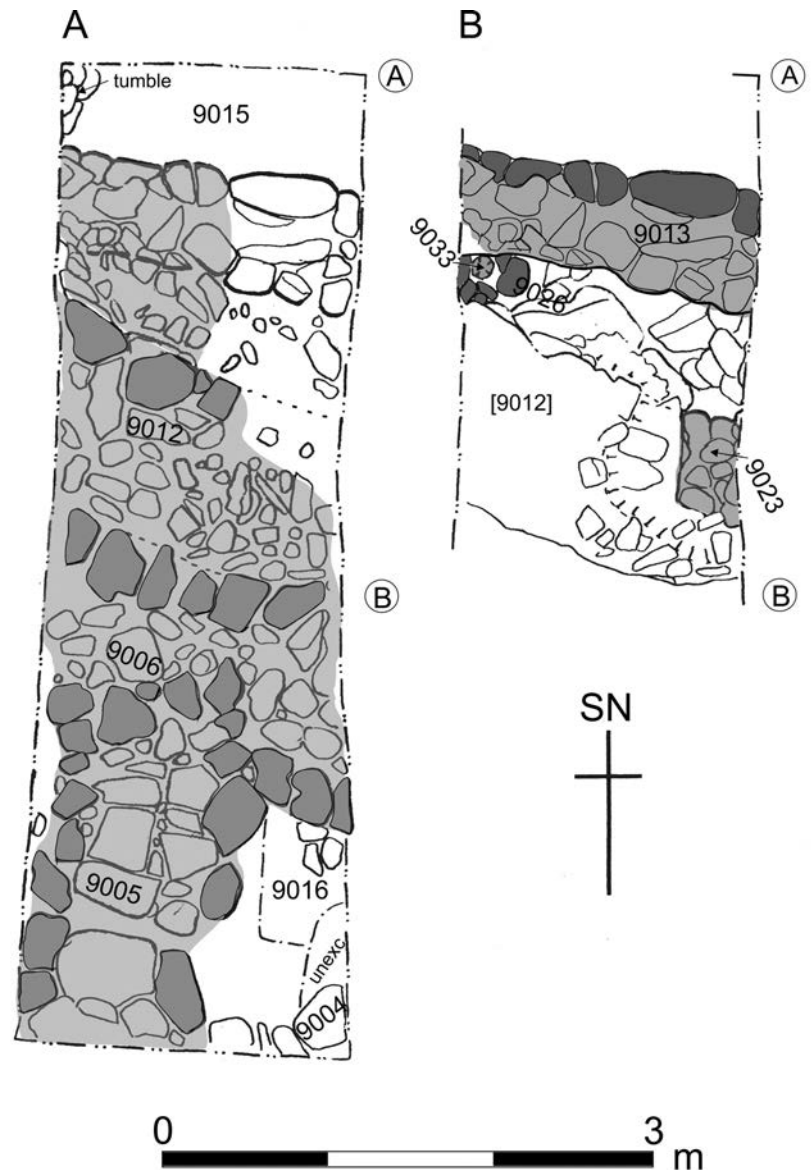


Illustration 10.26  
Trench 9, plans, showing main features



## EILEAN MÓR EXCAVATIONS ON THE SPINE OF THE ISLAND

turf there were no surface indications of the underlying features, only a noticeable slope downwards in the north portion of the trench, reflecting the edge of the island's high ground or spine.

Excavation in trench 12 in the apparently open area adjacent and to the north of trench 9 showed that it had been cultivated in post-medieval times. This gardening activity had extended into the northern end of trench 9, being evident in the form of a layer of loam intermixed with gravel, fragments of charcoal and several small angular pieces of stone, especially limestone [9007]. It had a maximum depth of 23cm. The tools that had worked it had eaten away at the north edge of an earlier cobbled road [9012].

### *Road and paths, and structure 9.1 (Illus 10.26–30)*

The main features encountered in trench 9 were a series of cobbled roads and paths. Stratigraphically the most recent was a path [9005] running north–south, partially integrated with the structure of an earlier road [9006, 9012], which it crossed obliquely.

The path probably connected with the entrance into house F, supposed on the basis of surface indications to lie just to the south of trench 9. It would have headed in the other direction into the garden area where it was encountered as path 12159. At the south of trench 9 some tumbled stones [9004], including a few small fragments of type A roof slates possibly reused as pin-nings, might be supposed to have come from the walls of house F. An iron key (F121) from the topsoil overlying 9004 might have been for its door.

Road 9006 was identified as a segment of the main medieval road from the chapel to the great hall exposed the previous year in trench 6. Like path 9005, the surface of this road lay just under the turf and topsoil and was largely unencumbered with tumble or debris, suggesting that it remained in use into the post-medieval period. As with the continuation of this road encountered in trench 6 [6002, 6008], it also may have been bipartite in construction, laid down initially as a 1.4m wide cobbled path [9006] with well-defined kerbs, and then increased to a total of about 2.4m by the



Illustration 10.27  
Trench 9, looking west, path 9005 running over the road [9006] to the right



Illustration 10.29  
Trench 9, looking east, from left to right, road 9013, road 9012/9006 and path 9005



Illustration 10.28  
Trench 9, view looking south of path 9026/9005 crossing over road 9012/9006



Context	Description	Interpretation
9003	Soil, gravel	Demolition tips
9004	Stones	Tumble from str F
9005	Set stones	Path from str F to garden
9006	Set stones	Road from great hall to chapel
9007	Loam, gravel, stones	Garden soil
9009	Compact gritty clay	Demolition tips
9011	Silt, ash, bone	Midden
9012	Set stones	Widening of road 9006
9013	Set stones	Cobbled road
9015	Sand gravel	Beach deposit
9016	Clay silt	Old ground surface
9017	Set stones	Support for road 9012?
9021	Silt, stones	Fill of 9013
9023	Clay, stones	Clay-bonded wall, str 9.1
9026	Set stones	Path, reusing surface of 9013
9033	Cut	Post-hole in road 9013

Table 10.3  
Trench 9 contexts

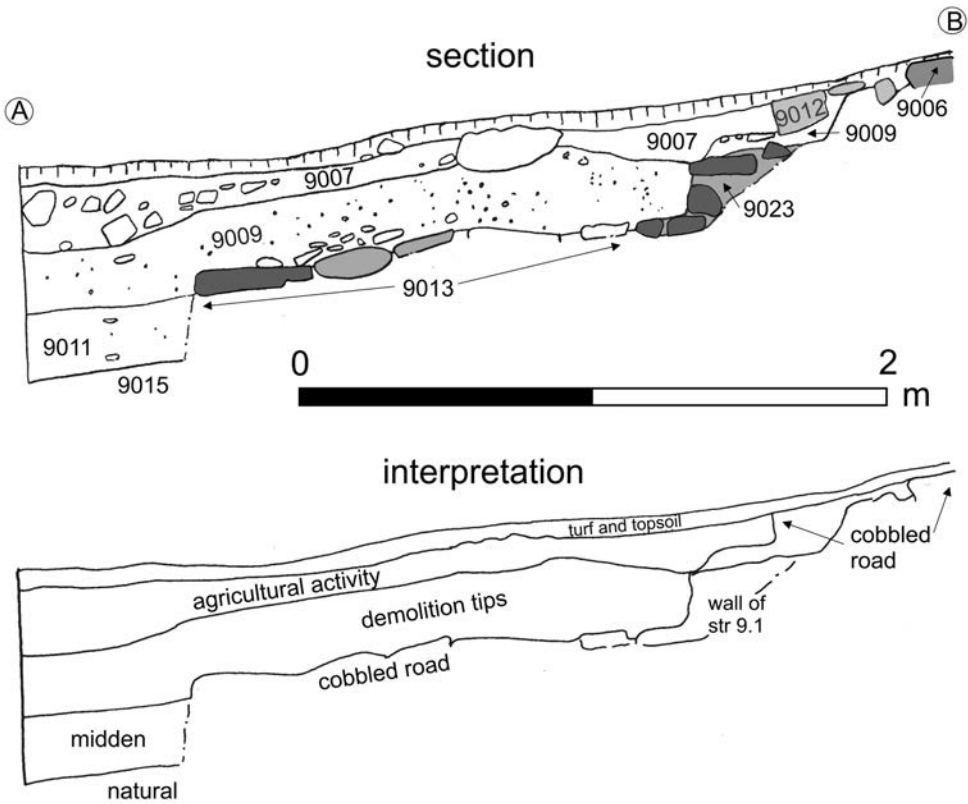


Illustration 10.30  
Trench 9, section A-B

addition of a further width of cobbling [9012] on its north side. Here too the additional width sloped down northwards, and its edge was defined by a kerb of large boulders.

It appeared that the road was partially laid over the ruins of an earlier structure (9.1), represented by a possible clay-bonded wall [9023] surviving two courses high, only a short segment of which was exposed in our digging. Other large slabs [9017] may have been arranged to support the road, and both 9023 and 9017 were enveloped in tips, up to 27cm thick, of sandy, gravelly clay [9009], some of which was probably derived from decomposed mortar. Also included were several broken roof slates, including type A, and nails. In the area to the south of the road and east of path 9005 the continuation of these tips was recorded as 9003. A small sondage under 9003 located a deposit of clay silt [9016], possibly an old ground surface. A sherd of redware pottery (SF 9044) was recovered from it. A core under it indicated there was a thin black deposit containing seed remains.

An earlier cobbled road [9013], on a similar alignment to road 9006/9012, was found to underly structure 9.1 and the 9009 tips. It appeared to have had an overall width of over 1.7m. Its south edge was not located, but on the north it had a neat kerb. Many of the stones used in its construction were quartzite. It sloped noticeably downwards in a northerly direction where it could be seen to overlie a midden deposit [9011]. A post-hole [9033] was identified in 9013, rectangular, 16 by 15cm, with a depth of 30cm. A sherd

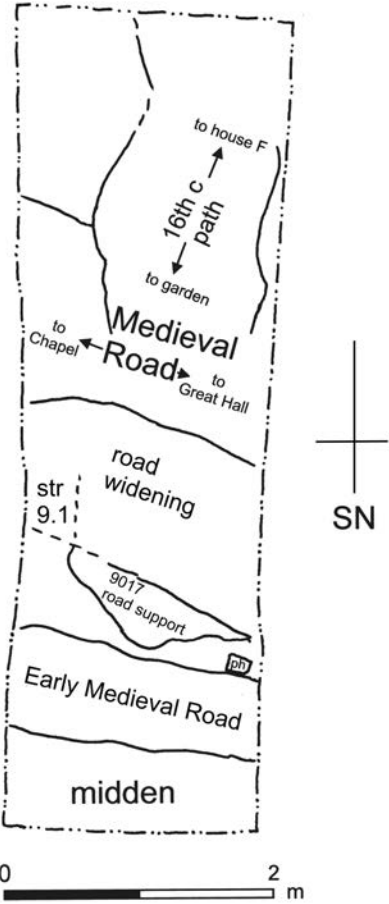


Illustration 10.31  
Trench 9, interpretative plan of main features

## EILEAN MÓR EXCAVATIONS ON THE SPINE OF THE ISLAND

of white gritty pottery (SF 9042) and another of reduced gritty pottery (SF 9046) were recovered from among the cobbles.

### *A midden (Illus 10.30)*

To the north of road 9013 and extending under it was a midden deposit [9011], probably a continuation of the midden [6033, 6034] encountered in trench 6. It contained lenses of charcoal, peat ash and quantities of animal bone in a very poor state of preservation. A sample (no. 23) weighing 8.7kg failed to produce any carbonised plant remains when it was subjected to flotation. Two sherds of white gritty pottery (SF 9032, 9035) and two of imported pottery were also recovered. One was a piece of base (P70), the other a rim fragment (P69), both from a polychrome jug from the Saintonge area of France. These finds suggest a 13th-century date.

This midden had accumulated in a build-up of silt, to a depth of 22cm, over a beach deposit of grey and yellow coarse sand and

gravel [9015]. The surface of this sand and gravel was at a level of about 53.19m, half to three quarters of a metre above the present surface of the loch in good summer weather.

### *Interpretation (Illus 10.31)*

Much of the evidence from trench 9 relates to a late medieval system of cobbled roads and paths which may have remained in use into, or was refurbished in, post-medieval times, when the adjacent ground to the north was being used as a garden and there was a house (structure F) to the south. The road [9006/9012] could reasonably be identified as a routeway connecting the great hall with the chapel, but the earlier road [9013] did not necessarily do so. The sherds of pottery recovered from it might suggest that it dated to the 13th century, and there was no more than tenuous evidence for a structure (9.1) alongside it removed prior to the construction of road 9006/9012.