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The Archaeology of Finlaggan, Islay

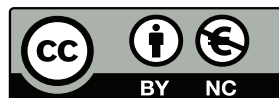
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ISBN: 978-1-908332-36-3 (hardback) • 978-1-908332-35-6 (PDF)

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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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Chapter 9

EILEAN MÓR EXCAVATIONS IN THE CHAPEL AND BURIAL GROUND

Survey of upstanding chapel walls

A 17th-century MacDonald history (Cameron 1894: 2.159–60) mentioned the construction or restoration of the chapel at Finlaggan by John I Lord of the Isles (1336–87). A 14th-century date certainly appeared believable prior to survey and excavation, even though there were no architectural features visible in the upstanding walls. The initial strategy for the excavations on Eilean Mór did not envisage the chapel's excavation. A survey, however, was made of the external faces of its surviving walls in 1989. In 1998 the rock types used were added by the geologist Nigel Ruckley, with the data plotted on the 1989 survey drawings (Illus 9.2). A hand-held magnetic susceptibility meter was employed to speed up the process of identification.

The chapel is one of only two buildings on Eilean Mór with substantial, upstanding walls, until recent conservation work much encumbered with mounds of debris (Illus 6.8, 9.1). The drawings by the artist J M W Turner in 1831, cited in Chapter 2 above, show that by that time the ruins of the chapel were very much as they are now. The structure was well founded on the level summit of the highest part of the island, arguably the best building plot on Eilean Mór. It measured 10.1 by 6.1m over walls about 0.8m thick. It was oriented (true) east–west. On all sides the ground sloped away except to the burial ground to the south.

The walls were of random rubble, with blocks and boulders laid roughly in courses and set in lime mortar. The majority of stones were rough-dressed blocks of limestone (over 50%) and dolerite (about 34%). The former would have come from the adjacent north end of Loch Finlaggan, the latter from geological dykes, the nearest of which crosses the middle of the loch. They were for the most part placed together tightly, with relatively few pinnings compared with other medieval West Highland architecture. This type of masonry was described as type 4 in a review of medieval architecture in the Lordship of the Isles by Caldwell and Ruckley (2005: 103). It was typical of architecture in the southern region of the Lordship of the Isles in the 14th and 15th centuries. There was no obvious pattern to the distribution of the blocks of limestone and dolerite, nor any readily definable difference in size and shape between the two types.

The exterior walls were originally covered with harling, no doubt leaving the dressings exposed. The quoins were of grey-yellow sandstone. The interior walls were plastered. The door

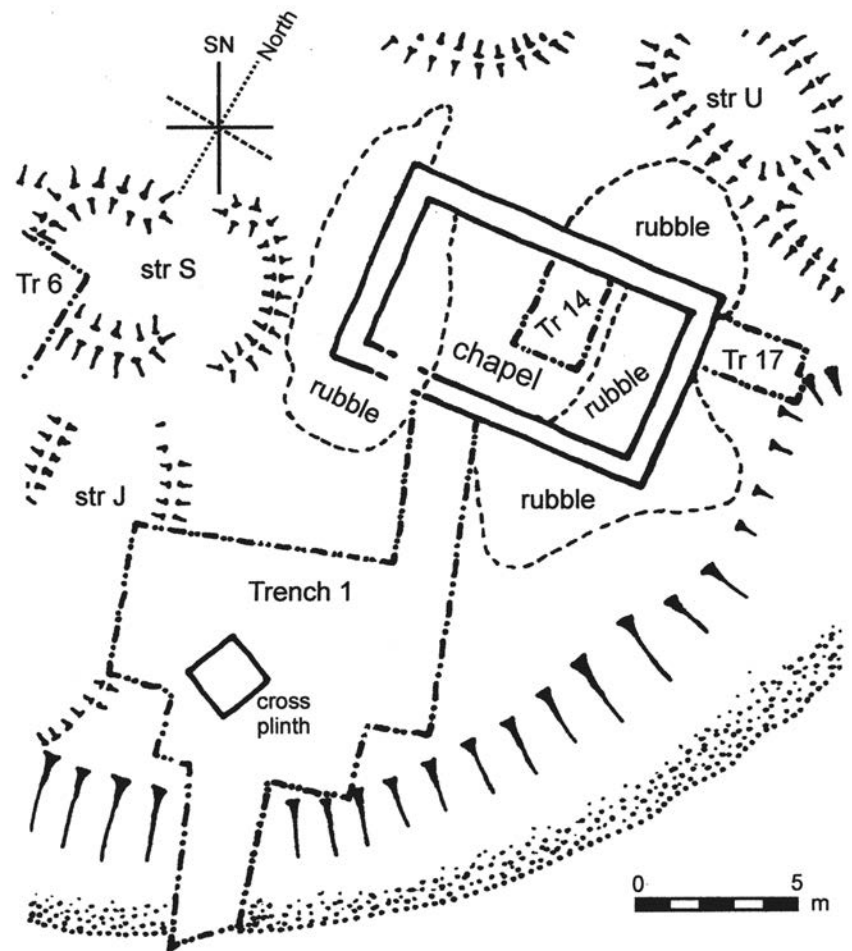


Illustration 9.1
Location map for trenches 1, 14 and 17

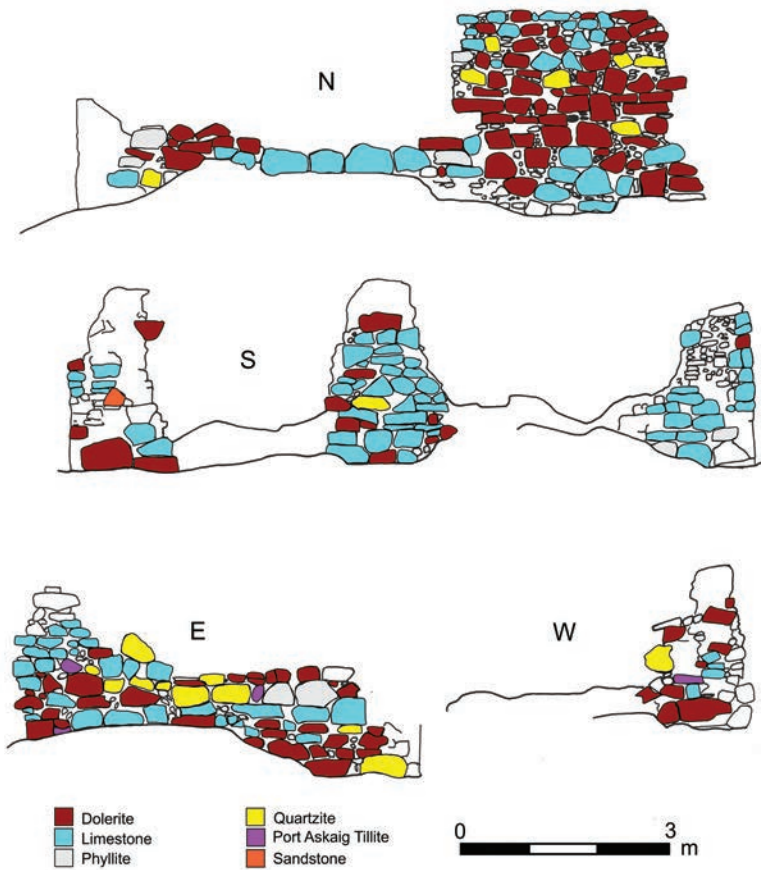


Illustration 9.2

The chapel, elevations of exterior walls showing rock types used in their construction

was at the west end of the south wall. None of its jamb stones remain in place, and there are no traces of window openings in the upstanding walls.

Trench 1, the burial ground (Illus 9.1, 9.3, 9.4, 9.5, Table 9.1)

The level area adjacent to the chapel was partially excavated in the first season of digging in 1990. Although RCAHMS had identified it as a burial ground, it was felt this interpretation was open to question, first because there appeared to be no depth of soil above bedrock, making the digging of burial pits difficult. Second, this highest point on the island was obviously a desirable platform for the dwellings of the living. It rapidly turned out that the RCAHMS hypothesis was the correct one.

Initially trench 1 was 10m east–west by 5m north–south, but it was extended southwards as work progressed, and a strip 2m wide was excavated northwards to the chapel wall, and another southwards to the water’s edge, giving a total area of about 84 sq m.

On removal of the turf and well-sorted topsoil, a level gravelly horizon [1007] was encountered over the whole area of the plateau at a depth of about 14cm. It was thought that much of this gravel, which consisted mostly of small water-washed pebbles from the loch shore, derived from the mortar, made either with



Illustration 9.3

Trench 1, general view of excavation in progress

lime or clay, used in the construction of the neighbouring buildings, especially the chapel. The south wall of the chapel had collapsed over the top of this gravel. Included in this tumble [1039] beside the chapel wall was a grey-yellow sandstone rybat (R27), most probably from one of the chapel windows. Embedded in the surface of 1007 was a broken moulding of similar sandstone (R26), possibly part of the jamb of the chapel doorway. The stratigraphical relationship of 1007 to the chapel was not established in this trench.

Off the surface of the gravel came several animal bone fragments, some burnt. There was also an assortment of sherds and pieces of metal. From a dating point of view, attention should be drawn to the following:

- SF 1005 (C1), copper alloy ring brooch – 15th to 16th century
- SF 1053, tiny sherd of Saintonge polychrome ware – late 13th to early 14th century
- SF 1099 (N39), billon coin – plack of James IV (1488–1513).

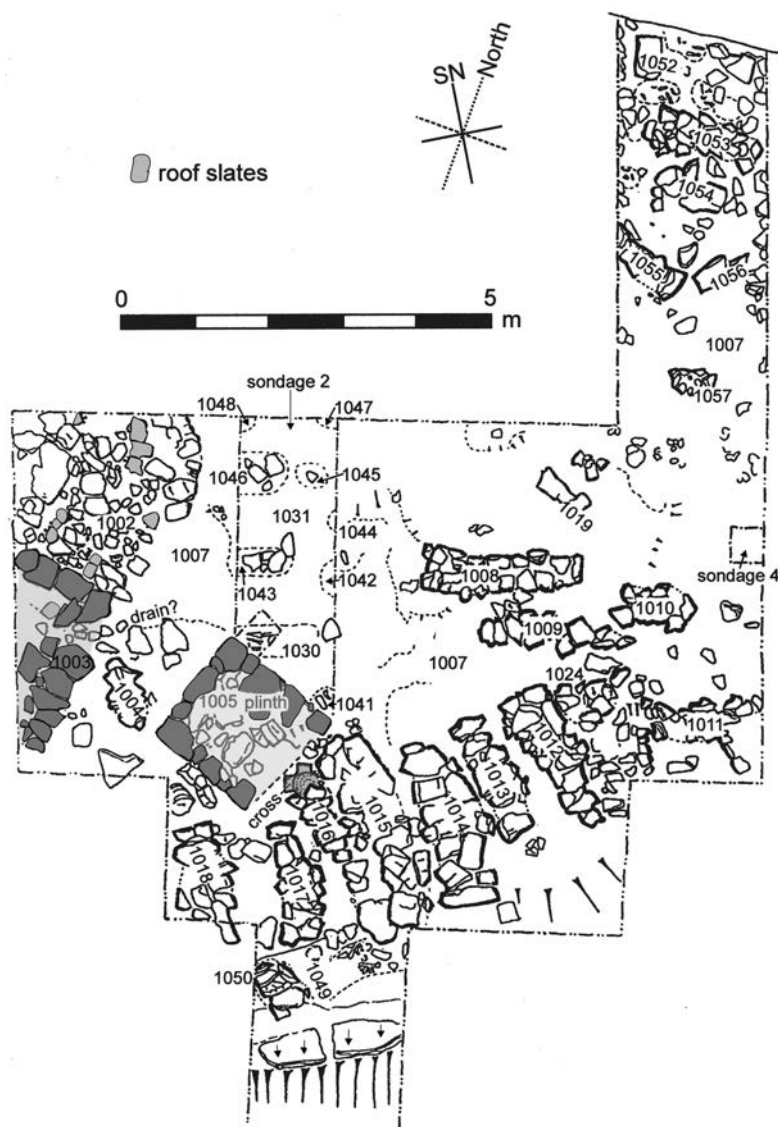


Illustration 9.4

Trench 1, main features exposed under the turf and topsoil

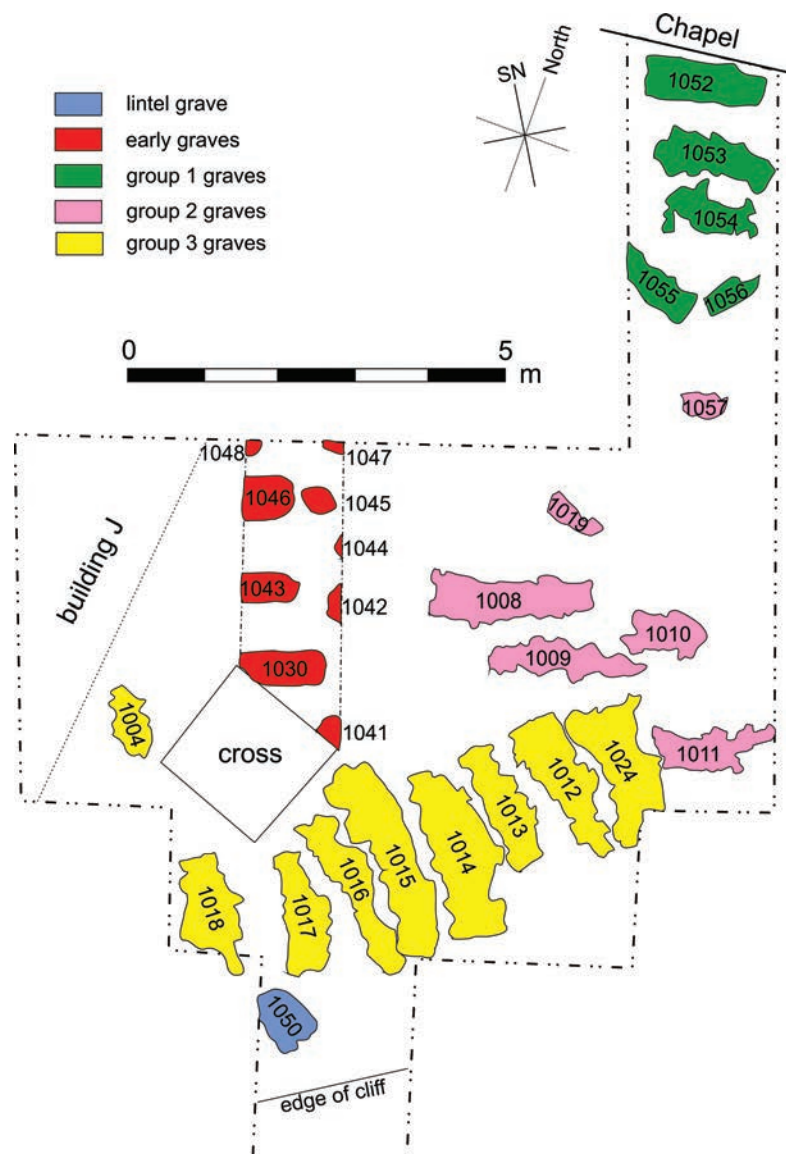


Illustration 9.5

Trench 1, interpretative plan of groups of graves

Presumably most of these objects sank onto the gravel in the course of time as a result of worm activity. Also, since the area was dug over so intensively in the process of depositing bodies, it is likely that pieces of an earlier age were churned up and redeposited. These finds, therefore, do not provide a secure guide to dating 1007. The formation of 1007 must also be largely due to earthworm activity, and the material in it may have derived from several episodes over a long period of time, including the construction and collapse of the chapel and other nearby structures. Nevertheless, since the gravel seals some graves (see below) but not others, it clearly is a chronological marker in the use of the burial ground, perhaps coinciding with the construction of the chapel.

Building J (Illus 9.4, 9.6)

Building J was mostly outside the area of trench 1, but part of its east wall [1003] was uncovered. It was reduced to its bottommost course above the level of the adjacent burial ground and appeared to have been of drystone construction. The south jamb of a doorway could be traced in it. The entranceway was paved with rough cobbles [1002], and there appeared to be a drain running under the wall from the interior of the building, exiting next to the south jamb of the doorway. This area of the trench was not fully excavated. Several type A roofing slates were recorded among the tumble from the wall of J. Several nails and some rivets from the gravel horizon [1007] over the burial ground were deemed more likely to have come from the demolition of building J rather than the chapel. More such material clearly associated with building J was excavated in trench 8, whereas further work



Illustration 9.6

Trench 1, with entrance and wall of building J in foreground and the cross plinth beyond to the right

in and adjacent to the chapel in trenches 14 and 17 failed to produce any.

The Finlaggan cross (Illus 9.4, 9.7)

An obvious feature encountered in the early stages of excavation was a rectangular plinth of mortared stonework $\approx 1.65\text{m}$ square [1005] and 40cm high, corresponding to R on the RCAHMS plan of the site, and rightly guessed by the Commission to be the plinth for a cross. It was oriented with its sides facing true WNW, NNE, ESE and SSW – notably on a different alignment from the chapel or any of the surrounding burials. The orientation of commemorative medieval crosses elsewhere in the West Highlands and Islands seems to have been with the main faces east and west. In the WNW side, part of the upper stone of a rotary quern of mica schist had been incorporated. The ESE side had collapsed, or perhaps more probably had been attacked with a pickaxe so that the cross-shaft could be levered out. Excavation along its north-east face revealed that it was founded on 1031, the clay deposit that formed the matrix for the burial ground. It protruded from the gravelly surface 1007. The plinth was therefore of earlier date than the formation of 1007.

The head of the stone cross (R.20), datable to the 14th or 15th century, was found where it had been knocked off this plinth, pitched head-first into the gravelly surface 1007. There was no trace of its shaft. Lying on the surface of 1007 under the cross-head and between graves 1017 and 1016 was a cup-marked bullaun stone (R.82, Illus 9.8).

Graves (Illus 9.4–6)

A series of longitudinal arrangements of boulders, readily presumed to be graves, were discovered. The stones were a mix of local types, and some had protruded slightly above ground surface before the turf was removed. It was evident that 18 of these 20



Illustration 9.7

The Finlaggan cross, R20 (SF 1037) (© National Museums Scotland)



Illustration 9.8
Bullaun stone R82 (SF 1047)

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graves – [1052–56, 1008–18, 1024, 1004] – had been dug from, more or less, the present ground surface and cut the gravel surface 1007. One of the other two graves [1057] was represented by a covering of stones set in the surface of 1007. It was, therefore, probably of earlier date than the 18 burials just listed. Other stones [1019] in the surface of 1007 may be the remains of one or more other graves of similar date to 1057. In terms of alignment there were at least three groups of them, the orientations of which were approximately:

1. True west–east. This group included at least three adjacent and parallel to the chapel: 1052, 1053, 1054, and probably a fourth and fifth, 1055 and 1056, though not enough of them were uncovered in situ to be certain of their orientation.
2. True WSW to ENE. There were six graves in this group: 1008–11, 1019, 1057.
3. True north–west to south–east. This group included nine graves: 1004, 1012–18, 1024.

If there was any chronological significance in this division one might suppose that the group 3 graves, mostly on the edge of the platform, furthest from the chapel and on a true north–west/south–east alignment, were the most recent. One of them [1024] was partially overlain by grave 1012, also of group 3. The stone covering of another group 3 grave, 1016, appeared to partially overlie the cross-head. Since it can be supposed that the cross would not have been smashed while Finlaggan served as the residence of the lords of the Isles, this is a significant clue that burials continued to be made in post-medieval times. The graves of group 1 had been disturbed by the collapse of the chapel wall over the top of them.

Having established that there was indeed a graveyard next to the chapel and that some of the graves were likely to be post-medieval in date, the prime concern was to discover whether the site might have been given over to other purposes at an earlier period. Strategies were evolved for doing this without embarking on a haphazard programme of disinterring burials. Nevertheless it seemed appropriate to excavate at least one of the burials with the expectation that it might open a window of opportunity into the strata that lay below.

Grave 1008 of group 2 was chosen (Illus 9.9, 9.10). The alignment of boulders covered a very shallow pit containing an extended inhumation, head to the ‘west’ (WSW), and arms to the sides. The pit was barely long enough for the body, resulting in the skull being propped up against the pit end. The right hand was over the pelvis, but if the left had been so placed, it had slipped sideways soon after deposition. It is probable that the stone alignment over the top was not intended to show above the ground surface. There was no evidence of any coffin or other container for the body, or of any fastening for a shroud. There was, however, a group of disarticulated human bones [1020B] stacked over the feet of the body, presumed to be from earlier inhumations disturbed at the time of burial. At least three adults and two children were represented by them. The main inhumation [1020A] was a male, probably about 35 to 40 years of age. For more information see the report in Chapter C8 of the Catalogue by Kath McSweeney on the human bones from Finlaggan.



Illustration 9.9

Trench 1, grave 1008 partially excavated, showing group of disarticulated human bones [1020B] stacked over the feet of the body

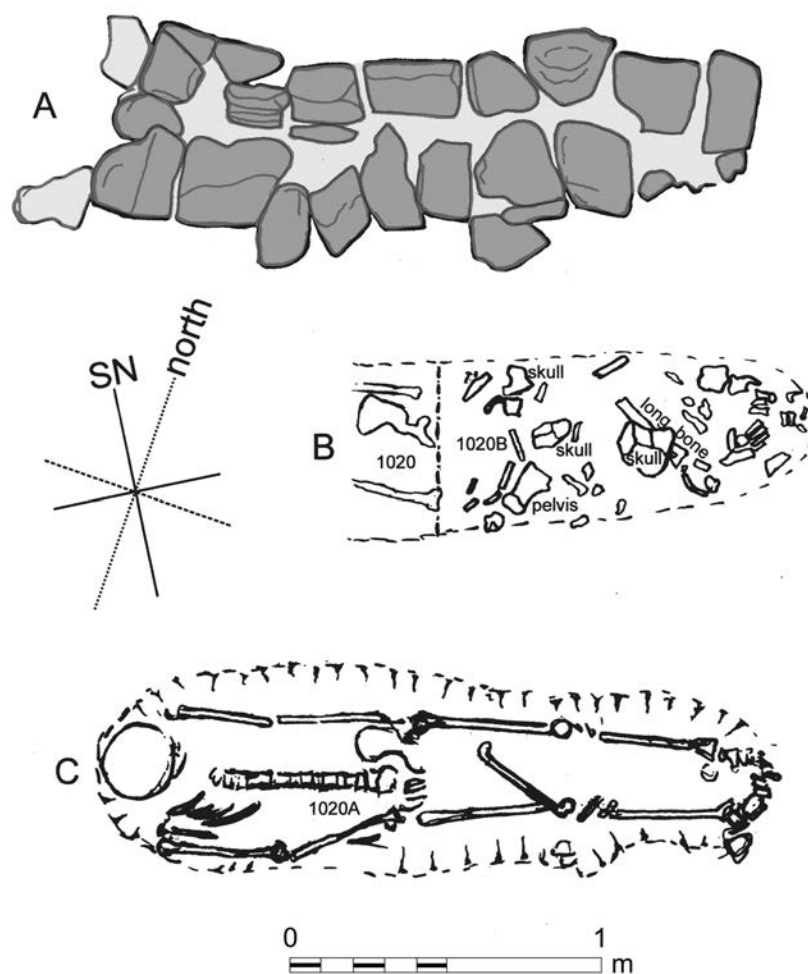


Illustration 9.10

Trench 1, grave 1008: (A) covering of boulders; (B) group of disarticulated human bones [1020B] stacked over the feet of the body; (C) fully excavated inhumation 1020A



Illustration 9.11
Trench 1, sondage 2 and the cross plinth from north

A strip of the gravel surface 1.3m wide, running northwards from the cross plinth, was removed (sondage 2) (Illus 9.5, 9.11). The gravel was about 5cm deep and consisted of small water-washed pebbles mixed with a spread of pieces of smashed angular white quartz (over 30 by 30mm). It covered at least another nine burial pits [1030, 1041–48] apparently all on the same alignment as 1008. These were not excavated, apart from a small sondage (1) into one of two [1030] partially covered by the cross plinth. Part of the pelvis, spine and left arm bones of an individual were exposed but not lifted, lying at a depth of about 20cm below 1007. At least three of these burial pits, 1041, 1043 and 1046, had pieces of limestone flush with their surfaces.

Two other small sondages were dug to check for earlier use of this burial ground. One (sondage 3), about 1 by 0.5m, was excavated from the base of grave 1008 (Illus 9.12). This partially revealed three other inhumations [1037, 1038, 1040] on the same alignment as 1020A but only 6cm deeper. The other sondage (4), about 0.5m square, was excavated to the east of grave 1008, adjacent to the trench edge (Illus 9.4). Here the gravelly surface 1007 sealed a deposit of grey-green clay [1031] mixed with fragments of

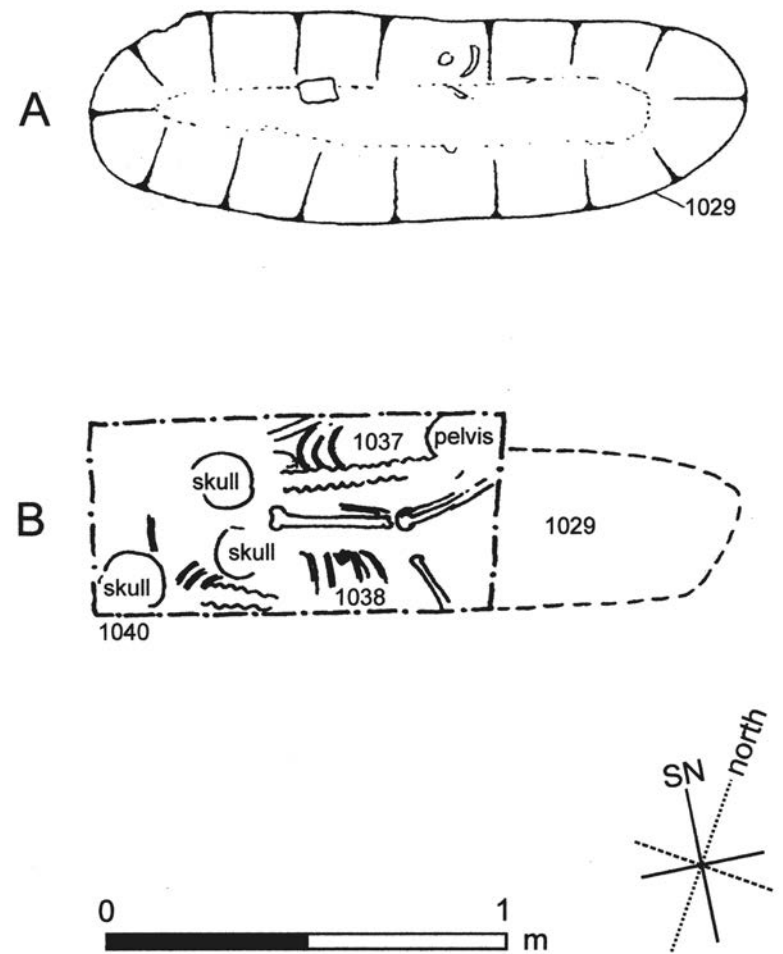


Illustration 9.12
Trench 1, grave 1008: (A) burial pit with inhumation 1020A removed; (B) sondage 3

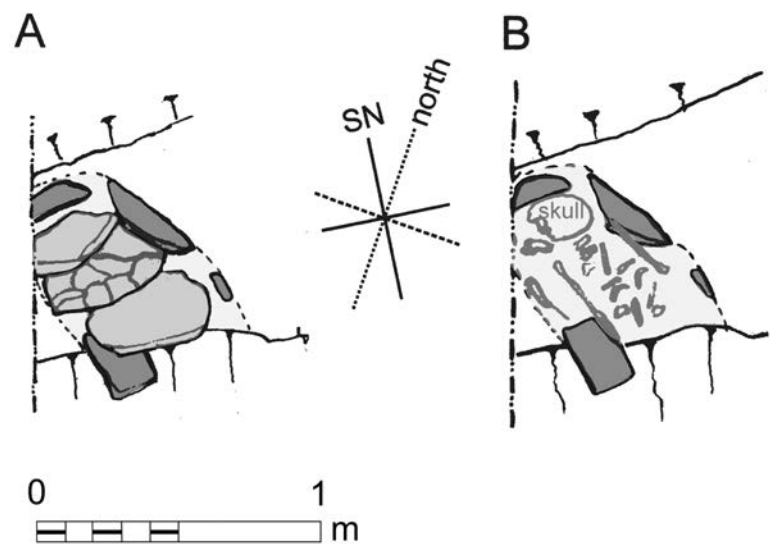


Illustration 9.13
Trench 1, lintel grave 1050: (A) with lintel stones in position; (B) with lintel stones removed

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Illustration 9.14
Trench 1, lintel grave 1050

bedrock churned up from below. It was about 34cm deep over limestone bedrock. This was apparently created by the frequent digging of graves over a long period of time.

A trench extension taken southwards down the cliff edge to the water revealed a process of rock fall and weathering resulting in the exposure of burials. One other grave here [1050] was fully excavated (Illus 9.4, 9.13, 9.14). It was positioned on a rock shelf on the very edge of the cliff, at a lower level than any of the others. The body was aligned true north-west to south-east and was contained in a grave with side stones and covering slabs of local limestone. Such graves are often now called ‘lintel graves’ by specialists, in preference to the widely used term ‘long cist’, the use of which is often restricted to graves with side stones only (O’Brien 2003: 67). The bottom portion of both grave and skeleton had weathered out of the cliff, but there was enough of the latter for it to be identified as that of a female of about 25 years. A radiocarbon determination (see Chapter 1, ‘Dating’) from the left humerus of the body suggested it was interred in the late 7th century AD.

Adjacent to burial 1050 and on the same alignment was another grave [1049], still with a skull in place. There was no evidence for any stone lining or covering to this grave, but it had clearly been disturbed by erosion and collapse of the cliff here at the edge of the island. At least some of the disarticulated human bones immediately to the east may have come from it. A rim sherd of decorated handmade pottery (SF 1083) from 1049 was probably of Early Bronze Age date but possibly redeposited.

Interpretation

The excavation of trench 1 confirmed the presence of a burial ground containing a commemorative cross and provided evidence for burials from early historic to post-medieval times. On the basis of excavation elsewhere on Eilean Mór, especially in the neighbouring trenches 8 and 17, some evidence might have been expected for a perimeter wall or defence. It is clear, for example from the fragmentary remains of the lintel grave, that the edge of the island here has suffered from erosion and collapse. More consideration of building J is given in the section on trench 8.

Context	Description	Interpretation
1002	Stones	Crude cobbling
1003	Stones and earth	Wall of str J
1004	Stones	Grave, group 3
1005	Lime-mortared stones	Cross plinth
1006	Stones, mortar	Tumble from cross plinth
1007	Gravelly spread	Construction and worm activity
1008	Stones	Grave, group 2
1009	Stones	Grave, group 2
1010	Stones	Grave, group 2
1011	Stones	Grave, group 2
1012	Stones	Grave, group 3
1013	Stones	Grave, group 3
1014	Stones	Grave, group 3
1015	Stones	Grave, group 3
1016	Stones	Grave, group 3
1017	Stones	Grave, group 3
1018	Stones	Grave, group 3
1019	Stones	Grave, group 2
1020A	Earth and human bones	Disturbed inhumations
1020B	Earth and human bones	Inhumation, grave 1008
1024	Stones	Grave, group 2
1030	Cut	Grave, early group
1031	Clay	Redeposited from digging graves
1037	Earth and human bones	Inhumation
1038	Earth and human bones	Inhumation
1039	Stones	Tumble from south chapel wall
1040	Earth and human bones	Inhumation
1041	Cut	Grave, early group
1042	Cut	Grave, early group
1043	Cut	Grave, early group
1044	Cut	Grave, early group
1045	Cut	Grave, early group
1046	Cut	Grave, early group
1047	Cut	Grave, early group
1048	Cut	Grave, early group
1050	Stones	Lintel grave
1052	Stones	Grave, group 1
1053	Stones	Grave, group 1
1054	Stones	Grave, group 1
1055	Stones	Grave, group 1
1056	Stones	Grave, group 1
1057	Stones	Grave, group 2

Table 9.1
Trench 1 contexts

Excavation and clearance work at the chapel

The Finlaggan strategic plan proposed a small trench inside the chapel with an area of about 10 sq m. As a result of discussions with Historic Scotland in August 1993, it seemed appropriate to extend this area of excavation to the exterior of the chapel. What was actually envisaged was a trench 2 by 6m running over the north chapel wall, but when the site was inspected the following month it was clear that this was not practical for reasons of safety and to avoid large accumulations of tumbled stonework. The solution was to dig two separate trenches, numbered 14 and 17 (Illus 9.1).

The objectives of this exercise were fairly limited. The work was undertaken to collect information on levels in advance of the programme of conservation to be undertaken by the Finlaggan Trust. It was proposed that the excavation within the chapel walls needed only to go as deep as the latest floor surface in use while the building was still intact.

Trench 14 (Illus 9.1, 9.15–22, Table 9.2)

Trench 14, 2m east–west by 3m north–south, was laid out in the centre of the chapel, with its north edge on the interior face of the north wall. This was a relatively level area that was expected to have only a few centimetres of material overlying a floor. Lying on the surface of the ground was a metabasite slab (R33), either a

grave-slab or, more probably, lintel. The topsoil had much decomposed mortar intermixed with it and gave on to a deposit [14002] of disturbed, redeposited, sandy silt. This, and the topsoil, contained fragments of 19th-century bottle glass and clay pipe stem, along with quantities of human bone.

Underlying 14002 was a level surface [14005] of clay silt, cut by graves. Only the east half of the trench was fully excavated to this level, and at least six graves (see Illus 9.22 for grave nos and associated contexts), apparently all aligned east–west on the chapel axis, were defined in it. None of these were fully excavated, but it was noted that grave 14.4 cut grave 14.5 and was in turn cut by grave 14.2. This last grave had a capping of stones [14010], including R17 (SF 14004), a fragment of a grave-slab. The cut was coffin shaped (rhombic or shouldered) and two iron nails were recovered from the fill, indicating that the body, of an adult, had been deposited in a wooden coffin. The bones were not lifted.

The fragment of grave-slab R17 can now be shown with reasonable certainty to be from the upper left-hand corner of R11, the 16th-century slab with the effigy of Donald MacGillespie (Illus 9.18). The upper part of the slab is severely fractured, the damage being consistent with levering and sliding the slab out of its resting place from its bottom end. It is possible that such a process could have resulted in R17, a substantial flake, becoming detached and being left in the ground to mark the position where the slab lay – that is, covering burial 14008. If that is the case, R17 (SF 14004) was only approximately in its original position (Illus 9.15).

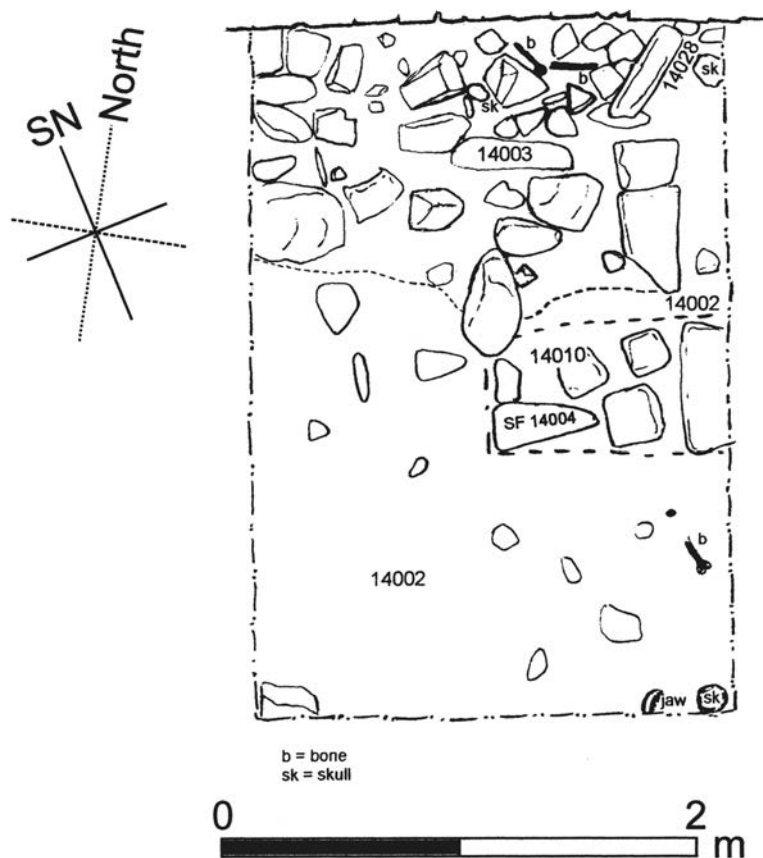


Illustration 9.15

Trench 14, plan showing capping [14003] of the charnel deposit and the capping of grave 14.2 [14010]



Illustration 9.16

Trench 14, the capping [14003] partially removed to reveal charnel deposit [14004] underneath



Illustration 9.17

Trench 14, grave 14.2 partially excavated with grave 14.3 beyond it



Illustration 9.18

Grave-slab of Donald MacGillespie (R11)

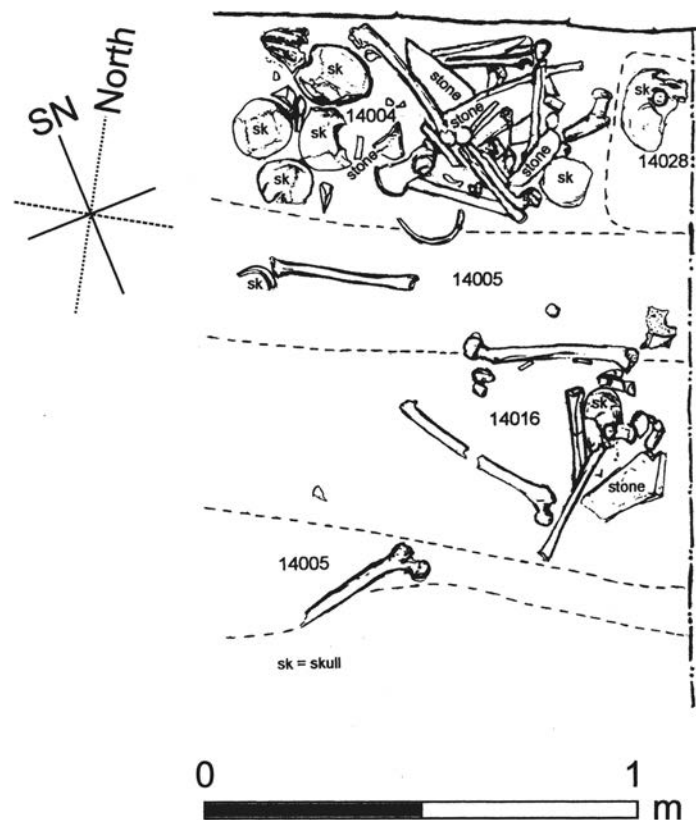


Illustration 9.19

Trench 14, plan of charnel deposit [14004] and graves 14.1 [14028] and 14.3 [14016]

When Miss MacLagan visited Finlaggan in 1882 she only noted three 'noteworthy' slabs, apparently not including Donald MacGillespie's effigy (MacLagan 1883: 38, 1898: 38). It therefore appears likely that it was one of the fine grave-slabs found in the chapel in 1894 when the Laird of Islay had rubble cleared from it (Graham 1895: vii, 28). This clearance work would explain why no floor surface was found in this part of the chapel. The slabs would have formed that surface at a level of about 55.40m above sea level. The glass and clay tobacco-pipe fragments of 19th-century date in the deposits overlying the sub-floor deposit [14005] are further evidence of this disturbance to a depth of 30cm or more below floor level.

One motive for this earlier clearance work may have been the recovery of the grave-slabs, but in the process several burials were disturbed. There may also have been a well-intentioned concern to conserve the ruins, reflected by signs of consolidation on the walls, but a local farmer (Arra Fletcher), then retired, told us in 1994 that about a hundred years previously local crofters dug in the chapel for treasure, but stopped when they heard bag-pipes. Even earlier clearance work is implied by the discovery about 1830 of part of a supposed font (R19) under the ruins at the east end of the chapel.

Along the north wall face of the chapel, under the disturbance [14002] caused by 19th-century excavators, was a layer of stones [14003] acting as a cover for a charnel deposit of disarticulated human remains [14004, 14006] packed into the foundation trench for the north wall. These bones may have been gathered up from earlier burials disturbed when the chapel was being erected. The

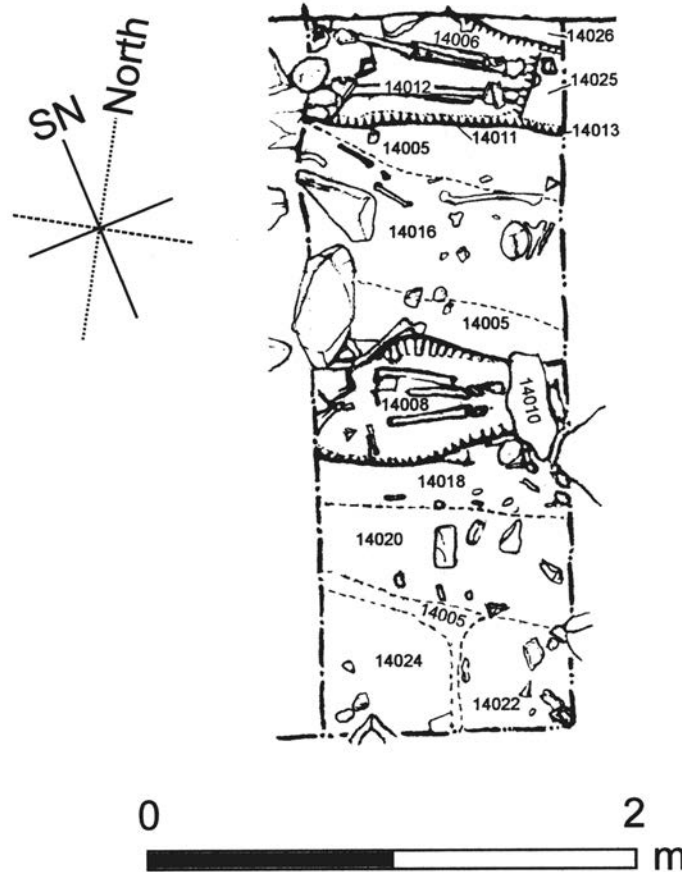


Illustration 9.20

Trench 14, showing full extent of excavation in the east half of the trench

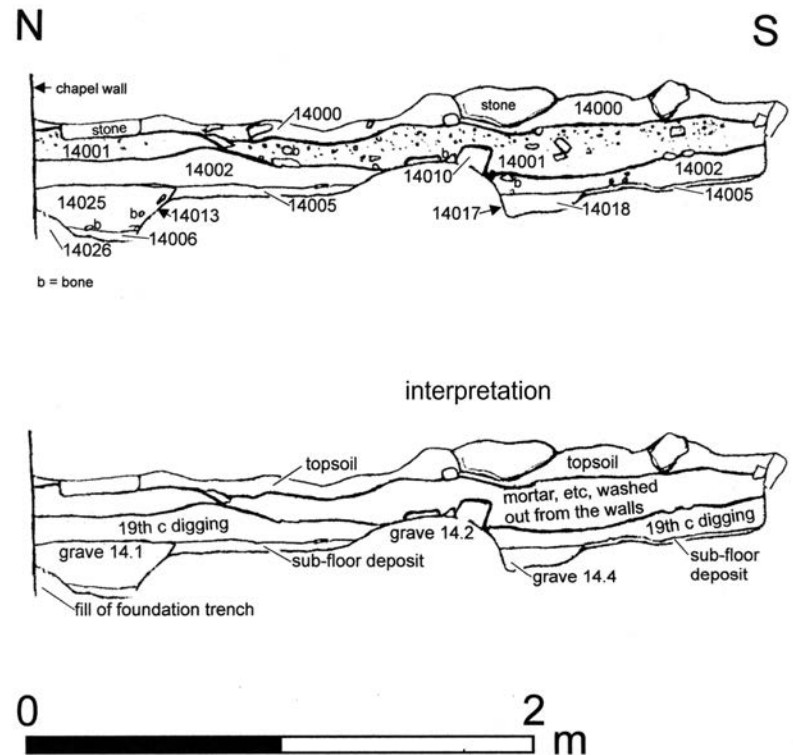


Illustration 9.21

Trench 14, west-facing section

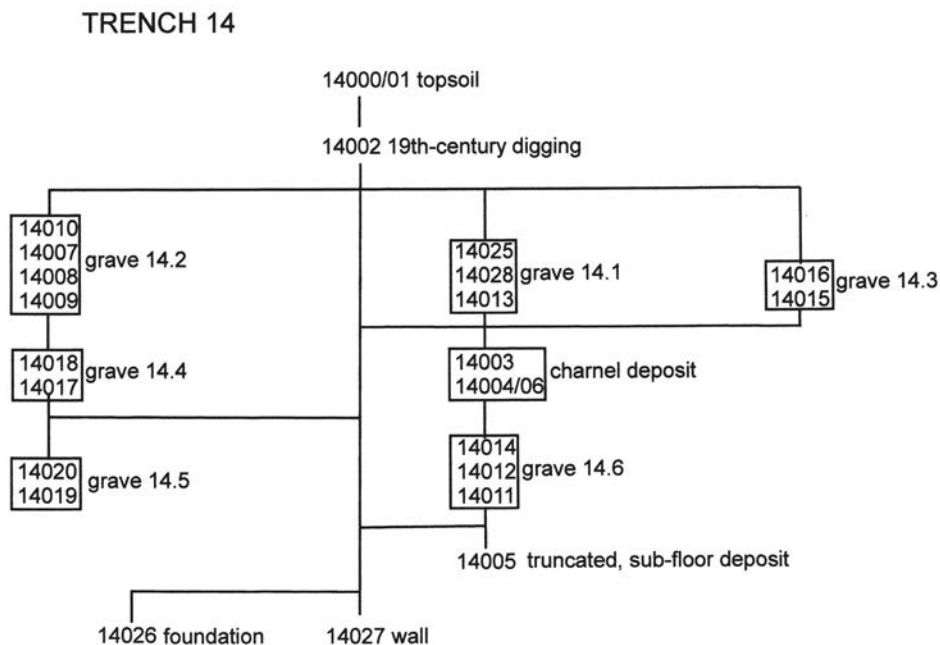


Illustration 9.22

Trench 14, diagram showing stratigraphic relationships and numbering of the graves and other contexts

decision was made to excavate part of this, as it appeared likely that its removal would create a window on to earlier sub-floor deposits. Apart from human bones and loose soil, the deposit contained 27 pieces of roof slate, of which 22 were type A, 4 type B and 1 type C.

It was found that the charnel deposit cut an earlier burial [grave 14.6]. It widened out from the foot, probably to give an overall shouldered or rhombic outline. This, together with the recovery of an iron nail to the right of the lower right leg, is a strong indication that there was a wooden coffin. It had been capped with flat stones, dislodged by the decay of the body and subsequent digging of the charnel deposit. Only the lower portion of a skeleton was exposed in the excavation, but not lifted. From the region of the pelvis was recovered B3, a piece of decorated bone, probably a plate from the hilt of a scale-tang knife.

This burial was cut at its east end by another [grave 14.1], mostly outside the area of the trench. It was at least partially dug through the capping of the charnel pit, and

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Context	Description	Interpretation
14000	Sandy silt	Topsoil
14001	Topsoil with decayed mortar	Washout from chapel walls
14002	Silty sand	Redeposited material, 19th-century digging
14003	Loose stones, silty sand, mortar	Stone capping of 14004
14004	Human bones, loose soil	Charnel deposit
14005	Clay silt	Truncated sub-floor deposit
14006	Greasy silt	Bottom of charnel deposit 14004
14007	Silt with sand, small stones	Grave 14.2, fill
14008	Skeleton, legs only	Grave 14.2, coffin burial
14009	Cut	Grave 14.2
14010	Stones	Grave 14.2, capping
14011	Cut	Grave 14.6
14012	Skeleton	Shroud burial
14013	Cut	Grave 14.1
14014	Stones, broken roof-slates	Grave 14.6, capping
14015	Cut	Grave 14.3
14016	Gritty clay silt	Grave 14.3
14017	Cut	Grave 14.4
14018	Gritty clay silt	Grave 14.4, fill
14019	Cut	Grave 14.5
14020	Sandy silt	Grave 14.5, fill
14022	Clay silt	Grave fill
14024	Gritty clay silt	Grave fill
14026	Soil with stone fragments, bone	Fill of chapel foundation trench
14027	Stones, lime mortar	North chapel wall
14028	Human skull	Grave 14.1

Table 9.2
Trench 14 contexts



Illustration 9.23
Trench 17, with turf removed

therefore of more recent date. This was not apparent when its skull was lifted, on the assumption that it belonged with the others in 14004. The skull belonged to a young man aged between 17 and 25. It had three cut marks which were the probable cause of death. These had been made with an implement like a sword or axe. From the fill of this grave, underneath the skull, was recovered a piece of lead shot (SF 14009). It is improbable that firearms would have been in use in Islay before the middle of the 16th century.

Against and extending under the wall of the chapel, there remained a wedge of soil and stone [14026], including pieces of lime mortar, soft yellow sandstone and human bone. This was interpreted as the fill of the foundation trench for the wall.

Trench 17 (Illus 9.1, 9.23–30, Table 9.3)

Trench 17 was located outside the east wall of the chapel, adjacent to its north-east corner. The trench was initially 2 by 3m, with the chapel wall forming one end; an extension of about 1 by ½m was later added at the other end. The ground here sloped away

from the base of the chapel wall, about 1m over the full length of the trench. It then fell steeply to the water's edge. Under the turf and topsoil there was a thin spread of lime mortar and several blocks of tumbled stone [17001], possibly derived from the 19th-century excavations within the chapel; 17001 lay over an earlier ground surface [17002] formed over earlier tumble and wash-out from the chapel wall [17003]. Included in 17002 were two pieces of type D roof slates (R66, R67), and other broken roof slates were recovered from 17003, along with human bones and two fragments of a West Highland grave-slab (R13), one decorated with foliage. The inclusion of bones and broken grave-slabs suggested destruction rather than dilapidation.

Under the spreads of tumble and wash-out was deposit 17004, 5 to 10cm thick, predominantly of gravel in a matrix of clay silt, covering most of the trench. It included pieces of human bone, flecks and lumps of lime mortar, and fragments of type B roof slates. It was cut by the foundation trench for the chapel [17006], less than half a metre wide and as much as half a metre deep from the surface of 17004. A small piece of red sandstone (SF 17004) was recovered from it. The base of the wall was packed with

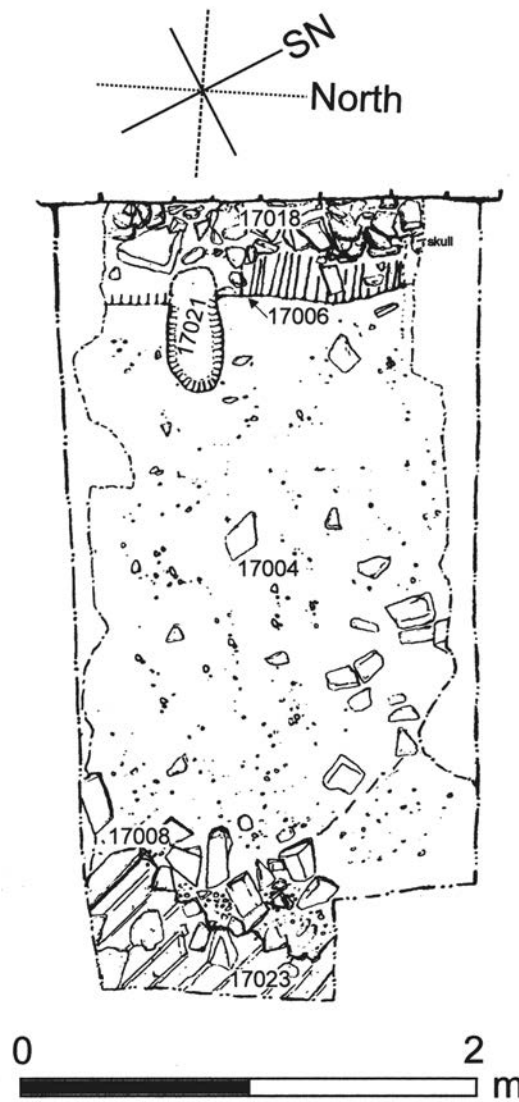


Illustration 9.24
Trench 17, plan showing chapel foundation trench [17006] and the turf bank [17023]

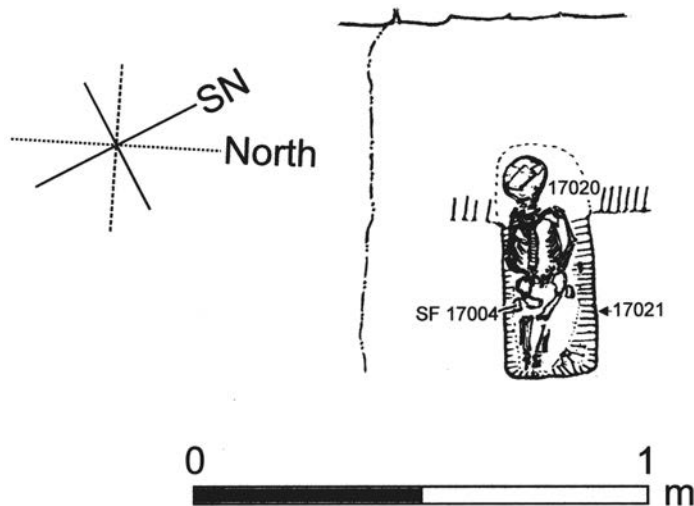


Illustration 9.25
Trench 17, plan of burial 17020 with infant 17021

fragments of limestone [17018]. The silt and sand main fill of the trench was cut by a sub-rectangular post-hole [17040], perhaps for scaffolding when the chapel was being erected.

Graves and other structures

The gravelly deposit 17004 was cut by two graves oriented (true) east-west. They also cut the chapel's foundation trench. One of them [17021] contained the skeleton of a baby [17020] about six months old (Illus 9.25). It lay on its back, head to the west, its knees slightly bent and its hands over the pelvis. Three small pieces of white quartz were found under the corpse.

The other grave [17030], containing an adult, probably male [17032], was not fully excavated. The body was also laid out on its back, head to the west and hands over the pelvis. Several small pieces of white quartz were recovered from the fill over the pelvis.

Under the gravel layer 17004 was a low, metre-wide terrace of mottled clay [17024], cut by the chapel's foundation trench. It

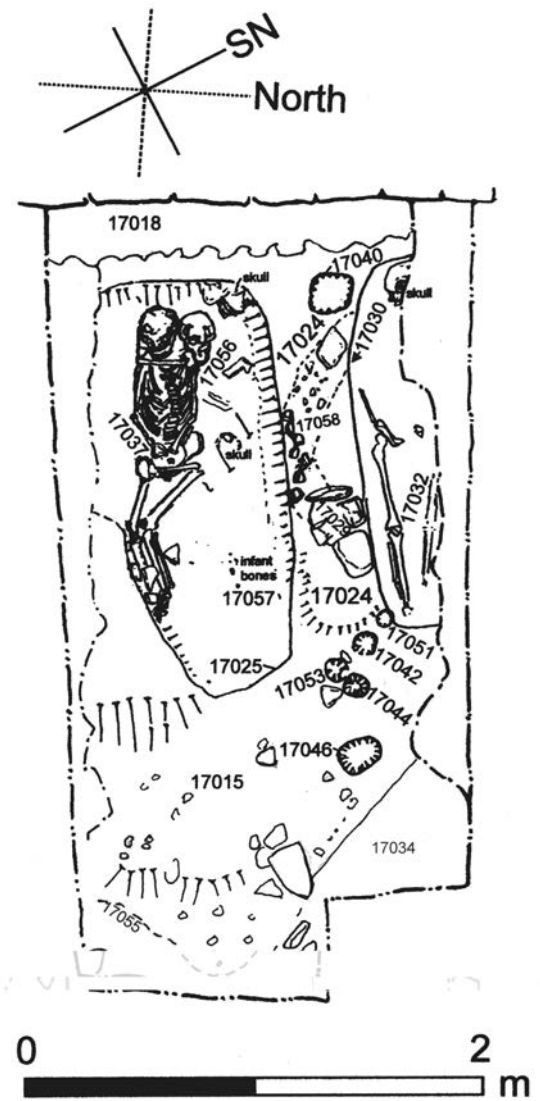


Illustration 9.26
Trench 17, plan showing the burial pit [17025] and the clay terrace [17024] with stake- and post-holes and feature 17058



Illustration 9.27

Trench 17, burial pit 17025 and grave 17030 with remains of terrace 17024 and other features in between

sealed a burial pit [17025] almost 2m long by about 0.9m across. This was only partially excavated, revealing two adult inhumations [1737, 17056], side by side, on an east–west orientation, heads to the west, with an infant [17057] beside them at the foot of the pit. None of these bodies were lifted. The pit fill [17025], a mixed deposit of silt with sand, clay, pieces of lime mortar, some small fragments of white quartz and disarticulated human bone, was generally crumbly or friable, and it was difficult to trace cuts within it.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the three articulated bodies had not all gone in and been covered over in the one operation. The child burial was evidently the most recent. One of the adults [17037] was sealed under a capping of stones, and was partially overlying the other adult [17056], whose skeleton was not fully revealed. Skeleton 17037 had its hands positioned over the pelvis and its legs slightly flexed to the right, apparently because the pit was not long enough for them to be stretched out. There were pieces of mortar in the fill.

The terrace 17024 also had traces in its surface of a curving feature [17058] identified as a construction slot (Illus 9.26, 9.27), with a stony fill and at its east end a post-hole [17029] with stone packers. It was not excavated. Beyond to the east was a group of four stake-holes [17051, 17042, 17044, 17053] cut in natural and sealed by 17004. They had diameters from about 8 to 10cm and



Illustration 9.28

Trench 17, collapsed stone facing [17008] of turf bank 17023

two of them had pointed bottoms. They had no direct stratigraphic link with slot 17058 and could be earlier or later in date. The same applied to a post-hole [17046] adjacent to these stake-holes. It was rectangular in shape, about 14 by 18cm, and had sharp sides and a flat bottom at a depth of 12cm.

A timberwork defence? (Illus 9.28)

Just within the bottom end of trench 17 was some slumped stonework [17008] interpreted as the remains of the internal revetment for a turf bank [17023]. This was represented in our excavation by a 3cm thick deposit of gritty clay silt. Both stood on natural, here a compact, orange sandy clay deposit [17015]. On removal of 17008 and 17023, the surface of 17015 was found to have a sharp cut [17055] forming an angle of about 115° in the natural, its legs running approximately south–west to north–east and north–west to south–east (Illus 9.26). The cut may have been one edge of a slot for timbers, now filled with mottled clay silt [17034] (not excavated).

Interpretation (Illus 9.29, 9.30)

The limited extent of excavation in trench 17 and lack of datable finds make interpretation difficult. The clay terrace [17024] cut by the burial pit 17025 had stake- and post-holes and a possible construction trench [17058]. The terrace was earlier in date than the chapel, but there was no meaningful stratigraphic relationship between it and the features at the east end of the trench. Indeed, the terrace may have been shaved away as part of the process of creating a platform for the erection of the turf bank [17023], internally faced with stone. The cut [17055] found underneath the turf bank may have related to a perimeter timberwork defence.

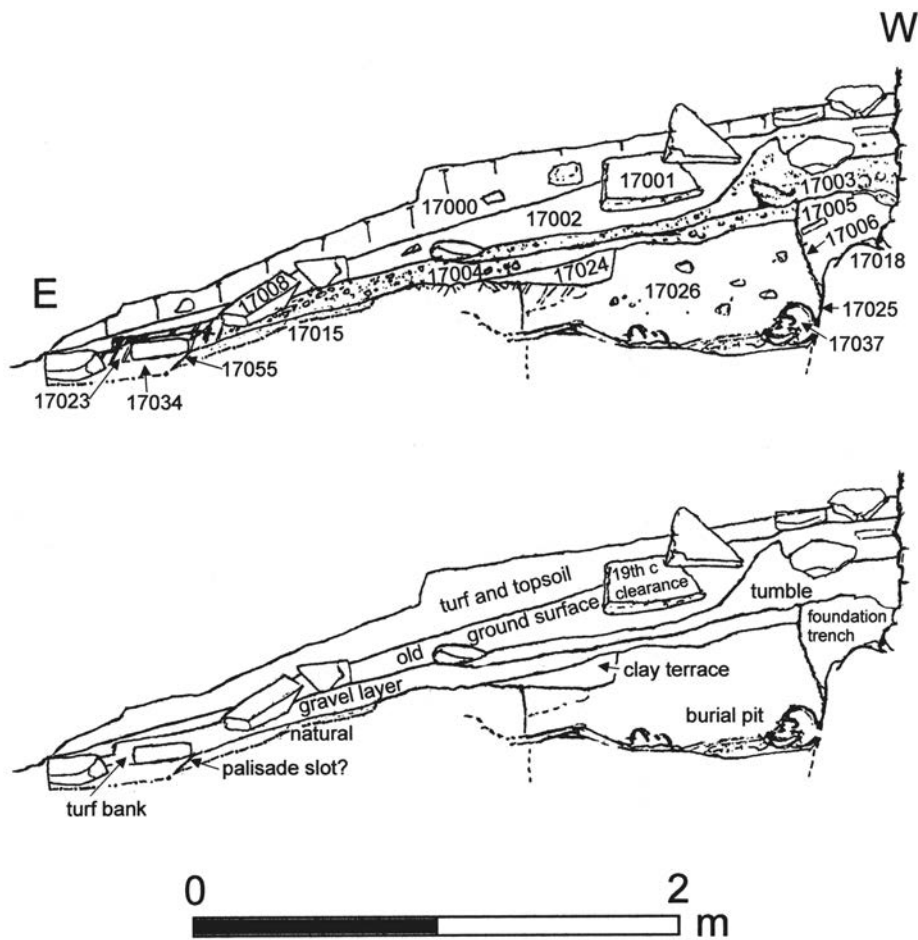


Illustration 9.29
Trench 17, north-facing section

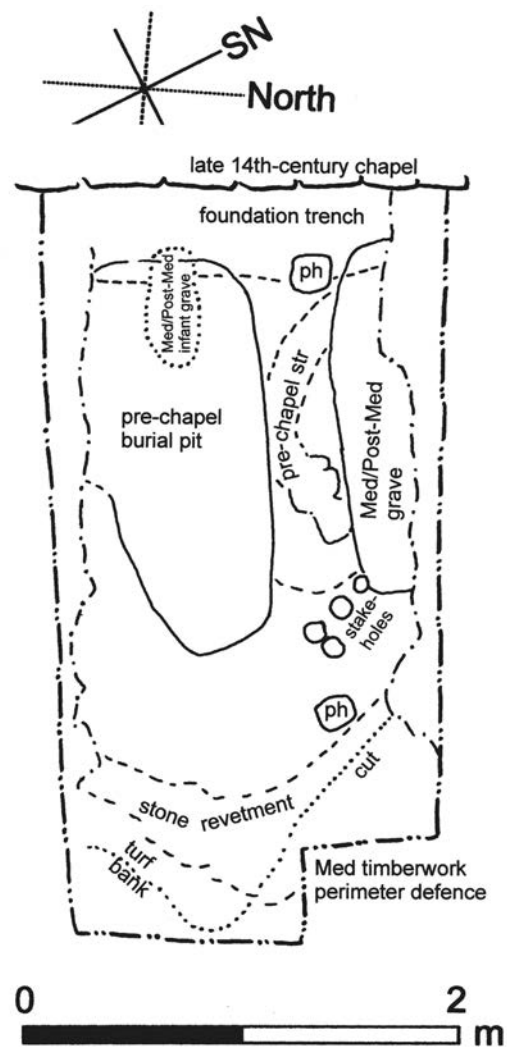


Illustration 9.30
Trench 17, interpretation of main features

Context	Description	Interpretation
17000	Soil with stones	Turf and topsoil
17001	Stones, mortar, debris	19th-century clearance
17002	Peat silt	Old ground surface
17003	Mortar and gravel	Washout from chapel ruins
17004	Gravel with silt	Construction and worm activity
17005	Silt and sand	Fill of foundation trench
17006	Cut	Foundation trench
17008	Stones	Slumped revetment for 17023
17015	Orange sandy clay	Natural
17018	Limestone fragments	Packing in base of 17006
17019	Gritty clay silt	Fill of grave 17021
17020	Skeleton	Child burial, pit 17021
17021	Cut	Pit for burial 17020
17023	Sandy clay silt	Turf bank for palisade
17024	Gritty clay silt	Artificial terrace
17025	Cut	Pit containing 3 burials

Context	Description	Interpretation
17026	Gritty clay silt	Fill of pit 17025
17029	Cut	Post-hole
17030	Cut	Pit for burial 17032
17032	Skeleton	Burial in pit 17030
17034	Mottled clay silt	Fill of 17058
17037	Skeleton	Burial in pit 17025
17040	Cut	Post-hole
17042	Cut	Stake-hole
17044	Cut	Stake-hole
17046	Cut	Post-hole
17051	Cut	Stake-hole
17053	Cut	Stake-hole
17055	Cut	Palisade slot?
17056	Skeleton	Burial in pit 17025
17057	Skeleton	Infant burial in pit 17025
17058	Cut	Construction slot?

Table 9.3
Trench 17 contexts

EILEAN MÓR EXCAVATIONS IN THE CHAPEL AND BURIAL GROUND

Clearance work in 1998 (Illus 9.1, 9.31, 9.32)

In 1998 scheduled monument consent was received on behalf of the Finlaggan Trust to clear rubble and debris around the ruins of the chapel as a preliminary step to conservation of the upstanding walls. The work was carried out by members of the Edinburgh University Officers' Training Corps from Sunday 5 July to Friday 10 July. Archaeological supervision was provided by the author, with geological advice from Nigel Ruckley. The chapel walls were conserved in 2001 and in the following year its associated grave-slabs were installed inside the ruin, further protection being provided by sheets of glass.

Most of the material removed in 1998 consisted of blocks of stone collapsed from the chapel walls. In total, about 12 cubic metres was taken away. Illus 9.1 indicates its approximate extent before work commenced. Not all of it was removed. The safety of the remaining ruins demanded that temporary buttresses should be left at strategic points.

Along the exterior of the south and north walls of the building the debris consisted of loosely packed stones with some decomposing mortar, unencumbered by soil or vegetation. It is possible that most of this stonework fell when the freestone dressings of the door in the south wall and supposed windows in the north and the south walls were robbed. The quoins had also been removed from the exterior corners of the building, and it was assumed that they also were of freestone, which does not occur naturally in Islay.

At the west end of the chapel much of the gable had collapsed, both inside and outside. Inside, the removal of this stonework revealed some wall surface still clad with plaster. Outside, the rubble was contained in a matrix of soil with a healthy growth of grass, nettles, etc, and here caution had to be exercised so as not to damage the adjacent building S.

Outside the east wall of the chapel there was a pile of debris, grassed over before the commencement of work. It contained some blocks of stone, presumably from the chapel walls, but was largely composed of sandy silt with decomposing mortar, human bones and fragments of grave-slabs. Similar material [17001] in trench 17 was interpreted as material thrown out of the chapel after it fell out of use.

The top part of this debris mound was excavated carefully to a depth of about 0.4m, revealing lime rendering (no different from the interior plaster) still in place on the wall surface. The rest of the heap, which was compact and stable, was left in place. Partial removal of this debris mound did, however, reveal a grey-yellow sandstone quoin still in situ low down at the south-east corner of the chapel. Pieces of other similar sandstone blocks recovered in the clearance work probably served a similar purpose.

Inside the east wall of the building there was a slope of debris, covered with nettles and grass, about 1.25m wide at its base and 1m high against the wall. This contained blocks of stone and human bones in a matrix of decayed lime mortar and plaster with much pale brown sandy silt and root penetration. It is probable that this material was piled up fairly recently. There was also evidence that the south-east corner of the building was tampered with and re-mortared.

Underlying the debris against the east wall were substantial remains of an altar surrounded by more collapsed material of an



Illustration 9.31
The chapel altar

earlier date, generally equivalent to the disturbed, redeposited sandy silt with human bones [14002] encountered in trench 14. It also contained 19th-century bottle glass and was thought to be evidence of the late 19th-century clearance work.

The altar is 0.90 by 1.55m, with a maximum surviving height above floor level of 0.58m. There was a gap of about 3cm between its back and the east wall of the chapel, which was plastered before the altar was erected. The altar was composed of blocks of stone in a generous mix of lime mortar. Only the bottom course of facing blocks was completely in place, the two front corner stones being of dressed grey-yellow sandstone.

An area of irregular paving slabs was uncovered immediately adjacent to the front and south side of the altar, including pieces of limestone, dolerite, quartzite, chlorite schist and bits of type A roofing slates. They were laid over a deposit (unexcavated) of sandy silt with mortar debris and small pieces of red sandstone which had accumulated, or been laid down, after the construction of the altar. The surface of this paving was at about the same level as was computed for the floor in trench 14.

In the course of this work several pieces of worked sandstone were recovered, of at least three different types:

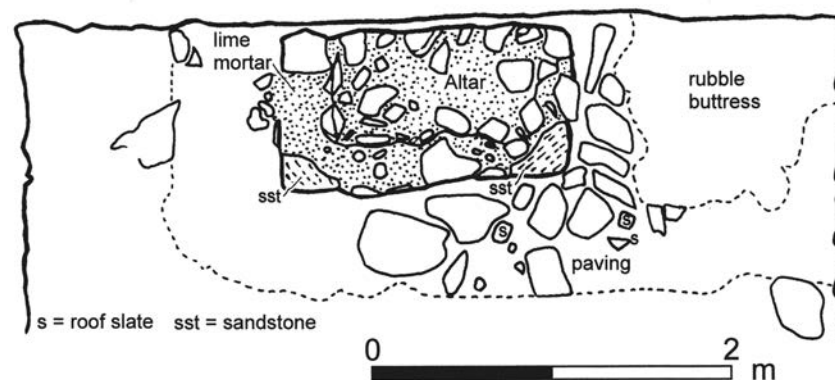


Illustration 9.32
The chapel altar, plan



Illustration 9.33
Ivory arm from a crucifix found in the chapel, B6 (SF 14013)

One piece of very crumbly green-yellow sandstone with no worked faces was recovered lying on the paving to the south of the altar. It can be identified as coming from the Carsaig Quarry in Mull. It is the first piece of Carsaig sandstone to be identified from a medieval context as far south as Islay. It possibly comes from a grave-slab. There are grave-slabs of Carsaig sandstone at Iona Abbey and elsewhere.

Several pieces of red or pink sandstone, probably from quarries in Kintyre, Arran or Ulster. These pieces generally have not worn well, and most of the pieces are small and lacking worked faces.

The largest group (in terms of bulk) consists of pieces of fine-grained grey-yellow sandstone, some pockmarked with holes as a result of weathering. Quarry sources for it have not been identified, but are also likely to be in Kintyre, Arran or Ulster. Some faces preserve the traces of diagonal tooling. The pieces include



Illustration 9.34
Halfgroat of Robert II (N24, SF 14011) incorporated in the mortar of the chapel (© National Museums Scotland)

blocks which probably served as quoins, at least two with broad chamfers from window or door embrasures and a broken jamb stone (SF 26007) from a window (?), recovered from the rubble against the exterior of the north wall of the chapel.

Some pieces of worked chlorite schist slabs were recovered, including three pieces which may have belonged to the altar top, found in the debris around the altar (R34/SF 14016, 14017, 14018). They are 30mm thick, with chamfered edges and pitting on the underside to help secure the slab in place. A fourth piece (SF 14019) reused as a paving slab was probably from a grave-slab. There was also part of the lower half of a medieval West Highland grave-slab, probably a child's (R14), recovered from the debris outside the east wall of the chapel. The design included a central cross with foliated base, a sword to one side flanked by scrollwork terminating at the bottom in a dragon's head. The carving is very fine, showing absolutely no sign of weathering.

Part of the lower stone of a rotary quern (R91) was recovered from the debris outside the east wall. It is of epidiorite – a foliated metabasite with pale feldspar (?) porphyroblasts, similar to rocks near Kildalton, Islay. It is probable that it had been built into the chapel wall.

Other finds included B6, a piece of carved ivory (Illus 9.33) identified as part of a crucifix from the debris in front of the altar, but perhaps originally sealed within it as a saint's relic, and a small strip of lead (SF 14014), possibly a piece of window came. The most remarkable find was N24, a bent coin (Illus 9.34), embedded in a substantial lump of lime mortar, well buried in the rubble against the exterior of the south wall. It is a halfgroat of Robert II, datable to 1371–90. It is clearly confirmation that the chapel was erected about that time.