



Society of Antiquaries  
of **Scotland**

# The Archaeology of Finlaggan, Islay

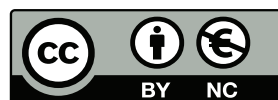
David Caldwell

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 8

# EILEAN MÓR EXCAVATIONS IN THE AREA OF THE LAZY BEDS

### Trenches 3 and 18

Trench 3, 10 by 2m, was positioned in 1990 to examine the bank enclosing an area of lazy beds (Illus 6.6, 8.1, 8.2, Table 8.1). The trench extended inside the bank on to a cultivation rig and to the exterior alongside a low circular mound supposed to be a

collapsed tower or entrance – the gatehouse – at the terminus of the causeway leading to Eilean Mór from the loch-side (Illus 6.7). It is here described as if it were laid out with its long axis on an east–west line. The bank was fully sectioned and natural deposits underlying it were reached, but the east end of the trench was not

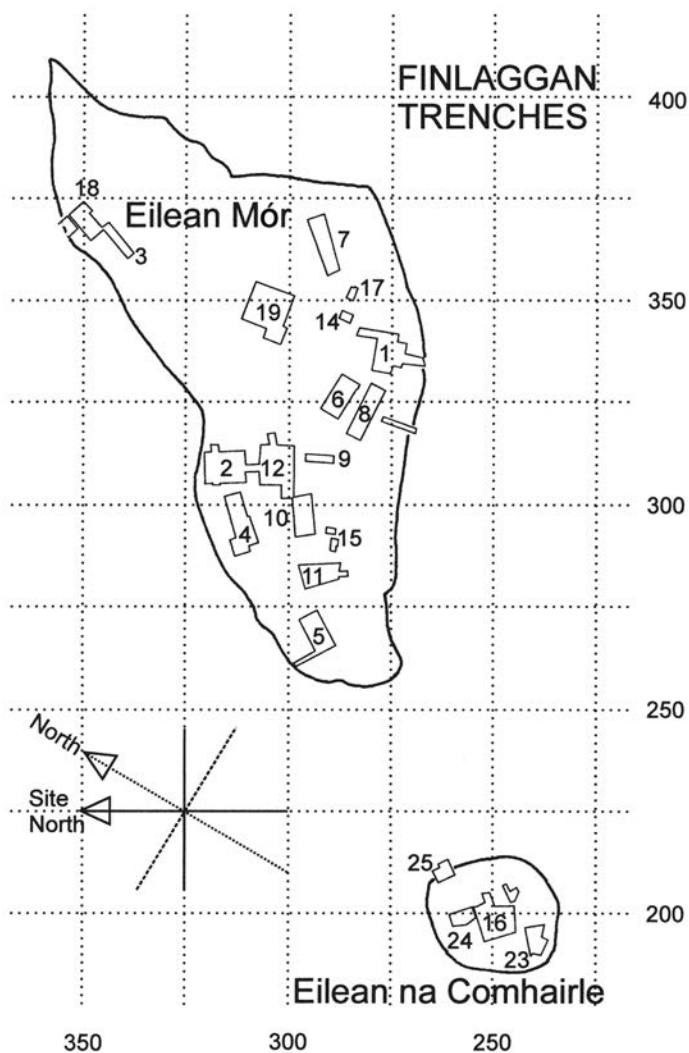


Illustration 8.1

Map showing locations of the trenches on Eilean Mór and Eilean na Comhairle

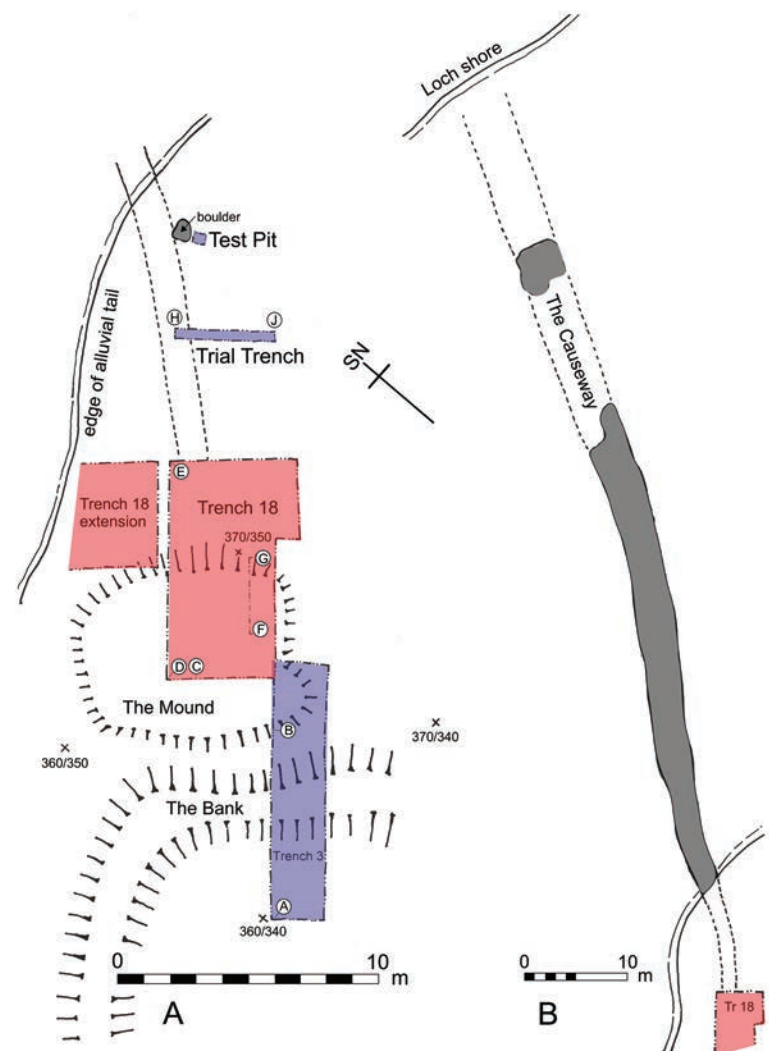


Illustration 8.2

(A) Location plan of trenches 3 and 18, drawn sections marked by letters A–G; (B) survey of the line of the submerged causeway from Eilean Mór to the loch-side

fully excavated. Useful information was gathered on the bank and its use as a support for a palisade, but not enough was done to elucidate the history of the mound and its relationship to the causeway and alluvial tail. Thus, it was decided to open up a larger area, trench 18, contiguous with trench 3.

Trench 18 was excavated in 1994. It was positioned partly over the mound and partly in the alluvial tail. The trench when first laid out was about 7m east–west by 4m north–south, its south–west corner touching the position of the north–east corner of trench 3. It was fairly soon extended east and south. At a later stage another area, 4m wide, was dug north towards the water’s edge, remaining separate from the main trench by a narrow baulk (Illus 8.2, Table 8.2). Problems in excavating this extension and the east end of the main trench were presented by flooding in rainy weather, and a pump had to be used on several occasions. Nevertheless, all the main artificial features encountered were examined or sampled, and a survey was undertaken of the adjacent submerged causeway (Illus 8.2 B).

### *Agricultural activity*

Under the gatehouse was an old ground surface [18067], the interface between it and the underlying sand corrugated as the result of ploughing. This can be seen on section C–D (Illus 8.17). Section C–D also shows a post-hole [18097] filled with sand [18096], sealed under the ploughing. This ploughing may be post-medieval or medieval in its final manifestation, having eaten into or removed most earlier traces of human activity.

After the erection and use of the gatehouse, bank and palisade, this area of the island was again returned to agriculture. To the interior of the bank there were lazy beds, represented by 3016, grey, stony clay, extending up the face of the bank and, therefore, being of more recent date than it (Illus 8.3 A). Further lazy beds were excavated in trench 19 (see below).

A post-hole [3058] in the crest of the palisade bank, with a clearly defined rectangular post-pipe and associated modern nails, suggested the presence of a fence in recent times, possibly a continuation of one extending down the north side of the Finlaggan Burn, rather than one around Eilean Mór, and another fence line, probably of no great age, may be represented by small post-holes, including 3020 and 3015, running diagonally across the bank from south–west to north–east. A post-pipe about 10cm in diameter was traced in 3020. Cut through the collapsed debris on the gatehouse mound were at least two, probably three, later post-holes [18018, 18025], both shallow, and possibly considerably truncated (Illus 8.6). The former had a diameter of about 40cm and contained four packing stones. The latter had a diameter of about 30cm.

### *Bank and palisade (Illus 8.3, 8.4, 8.16)*

Where cut by trench 3 the bank spread to a width of 4m and a height of 0.6m. The outer face was steeper than the inner. The bank was composed of fine-grained, light brown soil [3014]. It had been dumped over an earlier feature – the collapsed gatehouse – partially dug away to give the bank a steeper, higher front face rising out of a shallow ditch, partially silted up [3006]. Cut into the back edge of the bank was a shallow irregular trench containing

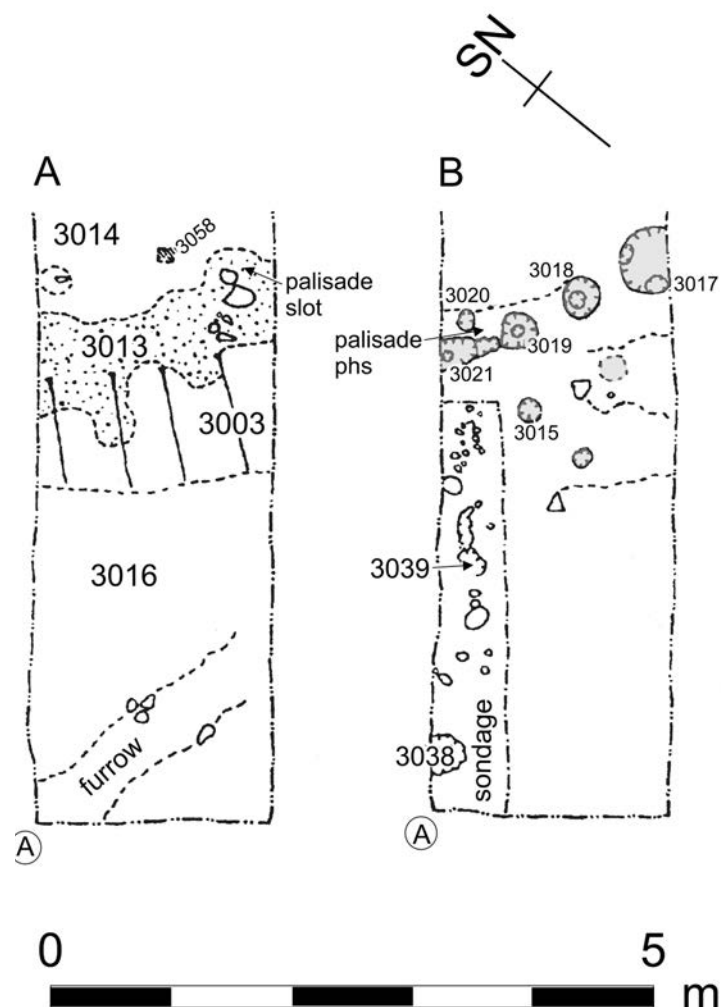


Illustration 8.3  
Trench 3: plans showing (A) bank 3003 and lazy bed 3016; (B) post-holes for palisade in bank 3003



Illustration 8.4  
Trench 3, lazy bed, bank to right with excavated post-holes for palisade



gravelly soil [3013]. From this trench were dug a series of four large post pits [3017–3019, 3021]. They were rounded in plan, centred about 60cm apart, over 30cm in diameter and tapered to a point at a depth of as much as 40cm. These post-holes indicate the former existence of a substantial wooden fence or palisade. Heaped on the back of the bank, and originally retained by the palisade, was a deposit [3003] of gritty, humic soil, interpreted as the slumped remains of a step for the defenders of the palisade.

#### *The gatehouse (Illus 8.5–8.9, 8.17, 8.18)*

The core of the bank underneath deposit 3014 was part of the collapsed structure, the gatehouse, represented by the mound. Prior to excavation the mound appeared as a low grassy hump, about 7m in diameter, separated from the bank by a shallow ditch. It was covered with spreads of gravelly soil [18006, 18009], interpreted as the weathered and decomposed residue of turf from the demolished or collapsed structure of the gatehouse.

The main part of the mound was composed of clay-rich soils [3012, 18007, 18069, 18053, etc]. In section, 3012 appeared in trench 3 as a complex layered deposit with pale yellow material alternating with grey (Illus 8.16). It is believed that this resulted from the decomposition of blocks of turf stacked one on top of the other to form a stable walled platform about 11m in diameter when originally built, its surface out of reach of inundation by loch water. The turf was laid on an old ground surface [3031, 18067] over beach deposits of sand and gravel and deposits of clay. At the time this was done the site of the gatehouse, as now, was probably at the very apex of firm ground on Eilean Mór, with only the marsh of the alluvial tail projecting further north-east and south-east into the loch.

The size and shape of the gate-tower itself was defined by the settings for a circular timberwork with an overall diameter of about 9m. These were best seen in trench 3 where a group of six were excavated. They showed as rectangular gaps in a spread of small boulders [3004], clearly forming an arc of a circle, no more than two courses high (Illus 8.5, 8.6). The posts would have been about 12cm square and centred at distances of about 60cm, one from another. Two larger post-holes [3050, 3061], each capable of holding a timber about 24cm square, lay inset from the others. This circular timberwork was less well preserved in trench 18, perhaps both because this segment of the structure was more exposed to damage and because there was a gap here anyway for an entrance-way (Illus 8.7, 8.8). Running across trench 18 there was a spread of possible packing stones [18046], probably mostly not in situ.

From one of the post-holes [3025] a group of three iron rivets and five roves was recovered. Counting each rove as evidence for one rivet, at least 10 could be identified as coming from the structural remains or debris of the gatehouse, all apparently of small size. A typical rove would appear to have been about 20 by 15mm and the thickness of wood gripped about 15mm. Other fragments of ironwork can be identified as nails, perhaps all or mostly of large size. One complete one (SF 18081) has an overall length of 83mm and its head is 23 by 19mm. All of this ironwork either came from contexts and debris associated with the gatehouse or later contexts like the lazy bed [3016]. None can be associated with the palisade and bank or earlier features like the causeway (Illus 8.9).



Illustration 8.5

Trench 3, the palisade bank to the left partially overlying the arc of stones containing post-holes for the timbers of the outer face of the gatehouse. The hollow retaining water results from the digging away of the gatehouse platform to give the bank a steeper face

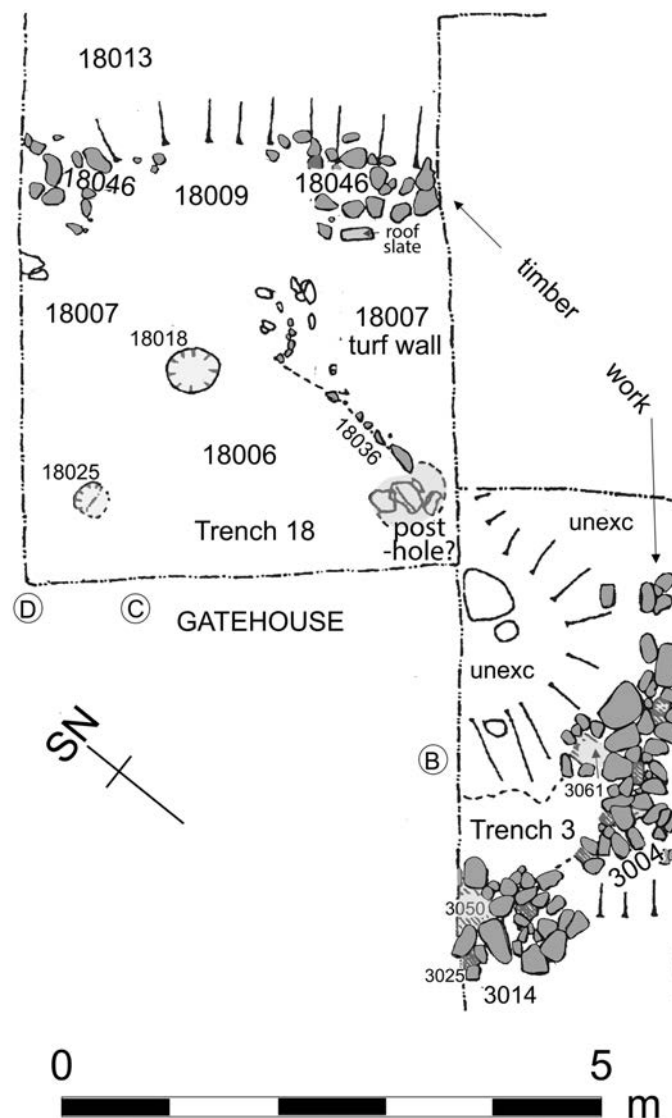


Illustration 8.6

Trenches 3 and 18, plan of features associated with the gatehouse, plus two later post-holes [18018, 18025]





Illustration 8.7

Trench 18, interior of the gatehouse, residual traces of the stone packers [18046] for the timbers of the outer face, still in situ, to the right



Illustration 8.8

Trench 18: the linear arrangement of small stones [18036] represents the inner edge of the turf wall of the gatehouse

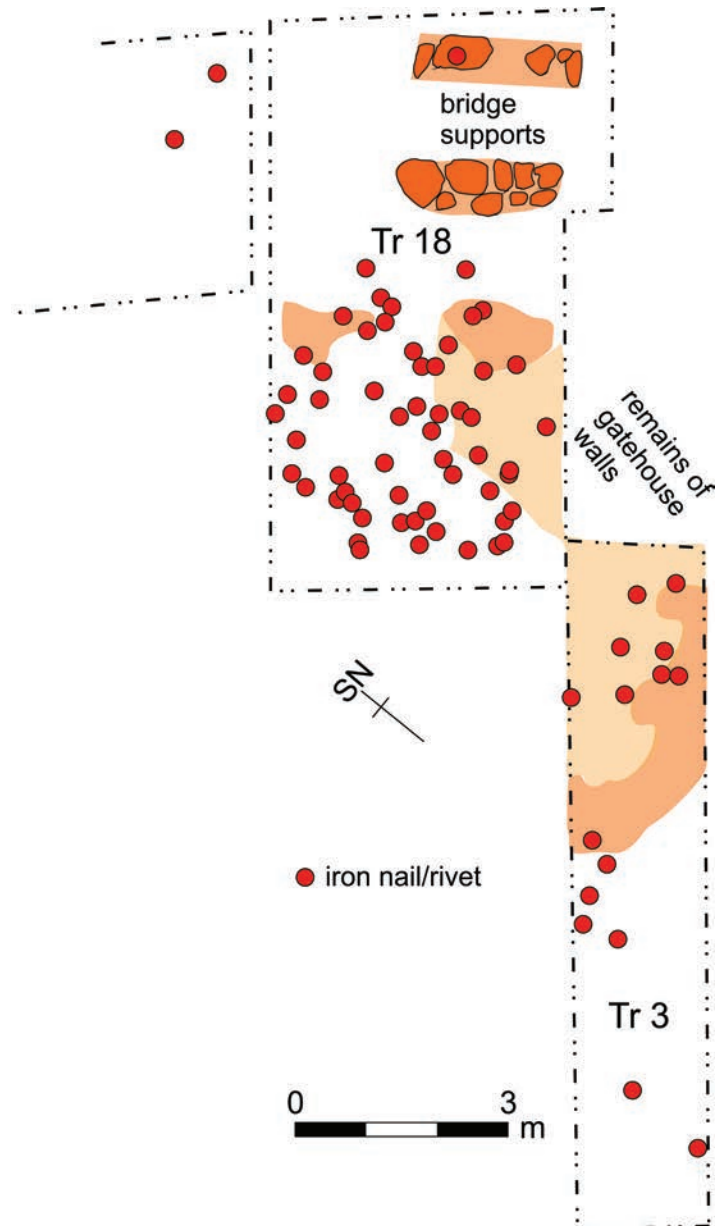


Illustration 8.9

Trenches 3 and 18, distribution of nails and rivets associated with the gatehouse

Within the circuit of timber uprights were the remains of a substantial wall of turf [18007], over 1.5m thick, represented by severely truncated deposits of firm, compact silt. Its inside edge was defined by an alignment of small edge stones [18036]. The circular chamber contained in the gate-tower would have had a diameter of about 5m.

#### *The bridge (Illus 8.10, 8.11)*

Some large blocks that protruded from beneath the turf were included within the area of trench 18 in the expectation that they were part of the causeway to the island. It was soon obvious that, instead, there was a substantial stone plinth [18001], 2.4 by 0.85m,



## EILEAN MÓR EXCAVATIONS IN THE AREA OF THE LAZY BEDS

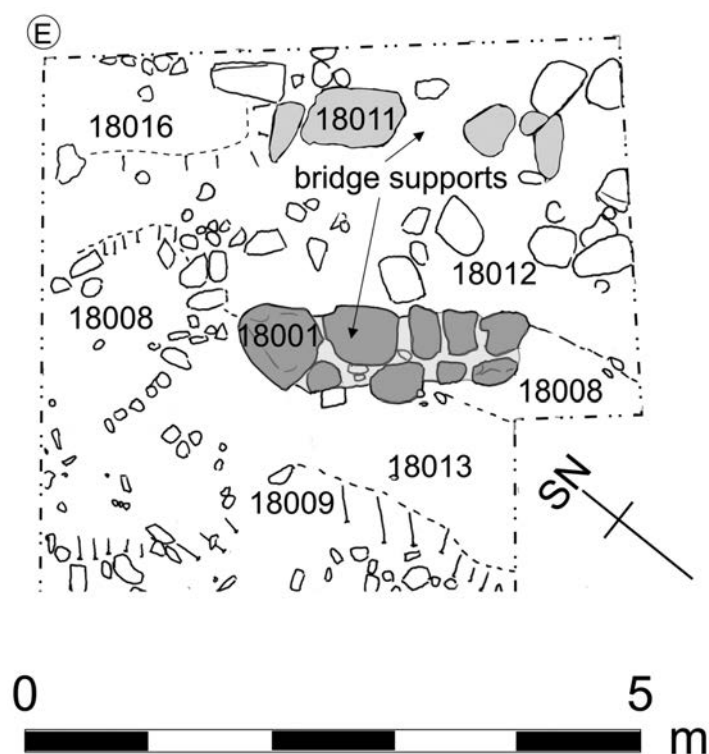


Illustration 8.10

Trench 18, plan showing the two stone supports for a bridge providing access to the gatehouse

oriented north-west to south-east. It is probably incomplete in both length and height, which was 0.32m at most. It was of dry-stone construction, composed of roughly rectangular blocks, only one course high.

A large tumbled block and other stones [18011], about 1.5m to the north-east, were supposed to be the remains of another similar plinth. Both have been interpreted as supports for a wooden bridge or raised walkway providing access to the gatehouse, and their position suggests an approach to the island from along the alluvial tail, not much different from the route of the modern wooden walkway. As already noted, no traces of an actual entrance or doorway have survived in the gatehouse.

The builders of these two plinths may have been aware that, between them, was an earlier ditch [18032], but the plinths themselves were laid on the surface of a band of silt [18012], one of the uppermost in a sequence of such deposits that had washed into the ditch and levelled it up.

### *The causeway and ditch (Illus 8.2 B, 8.12, 8.13)*

The remains of the causeway from Eilean Mór to the loch-side were also surveyed. The distance from the gatehouse mound to the opposite shore was over 90m, and for about half this distance the boulders forming the causeway could be traced in the water, mostly under a layer of silt, forming a low mound of tumbled stones, from 2m to over 4m in width (Illus 8.2 B). Adjacent to Eilean Mór's alluvial tail, where the causeway still appeared to have some structural integrity, it seemed rather different in character to that connecting Eilean Mór to Eilean na Comhairle. It



Illustration 8.11

Trench 18, view of the two stone supports for a bridge providing access to the gatehouse



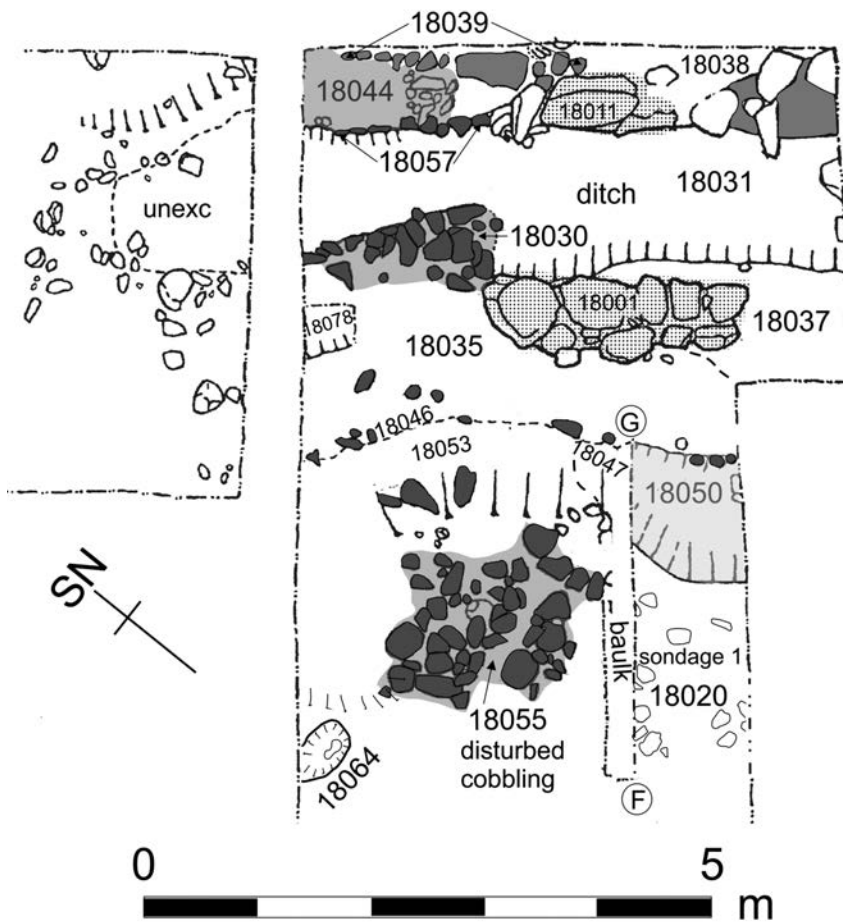


Illustration 8.12

Trench 18, plan showing the ditch [18032] and the access way [18044, 18030, 18055] across it from the causeway

was composed of smaller blocks and boulders arranged more irregularly. Assuming that the causeway was of reasonably substantial construction and solidity when in use, it is unlikely that time and tide alone could account for its present ruinous state. That may be down to deliberate destruction.

A small trial trench (Illus 8.2A, 8.19) was dug into the alluvial tail in the hope of exposing some intact causeway. It was positioned about midway between the end of trench 18 and the last visible segment of the causeway in the water adjacent to the alluvial tail. No trace of the causeway was found. At the time this was excavated it was supposed that the stones of the causeway had here been robbed, or else that this section was of timber, perhaps a removable bridge. In hindsight, it is probable that the trial slot was neither excavated deep enough nor quite on the right line. It was dug to a maximum depth of 52.08m OD, whereas levels on the visible stretch of causeway in the nearby water ranged from 51.57 to 52.45m OD.

Evidence for the continuation of the causeway, rather than the actual causeway itself, was found in trench 18. It was exposed in the north corner, under a band of in-washed silty sand [18016]. It appeared as a slightly raised, firm, gravelly surface [18044], extending over ditch 18032, and underneath the north-east side of the later gatehouse it could be identified as a patch of disturbed stones and boulders [18055] set in a matrix of clay silt [18065] (Illus 8.14).

Ditch 18032 ran across the full 4.8m width of trench 18 and could be seen to extend another 1.6m northwards into the trench extension to join up with the loch. As initially dug, it was about 2m wide with a depth of 0.6m. It was cut through natural deposits of sand, gravel and silt. On its outer edge it appeared to have been defined or revetted by stonework [18039] (not fully excavated). This seemed to indicate that there was at least a small area of firm ground to the north-east of the ditch at the time it was dug, prior to encroachment by the Finlaggan Marsh.

The ditch was filled with a sequence of deposits, stratigraphically from top to bottom:



Illustration 8.13

Trench 18, view showing ditch 18032 partially excavated, and the stone pier [18030], bottom right



Illustration 8.14

Trench 18, view showing ditch 18050, sectioned in foreground; beyond and to the left is the disturbed cobbling [18055] of the access route into the gatehouse



## EILEAN MÓR EXCAVATIONS IN THE AREA OF THE LAZY BEDS

- 180003, 18005, etc, deposits of silt, interleaved with 18006, a band of silty sand
- 18031 marsh sediment
- 18066 silty sand
- 18092 marsh sediment.

In broad terms the deposits of marsh sediment and silt can be identified as natural silting, while the bands of sand represent in-wash from major flood episodes. From 18031 were recovered a piece of leather, twigs and several pieces of wood, including the corner of a wooden panel (SF 18173), 8 to 10mm thick, with chamfered edges.

The crossing of the ditch by the continuation of the causeway was aided by the insertion of stonework. On the outer side this took the form of upright stone slabs [18057] about 0.6m in from the original ditch edge. Projecting from the inner edge of the ditch was a substantial drystone pier [18030] narrowing the ditch at this point to about 0.9m, perhaps readily bridged by stone slabs or wooden beams.

### Earlier activity

A shallow trench [18050], to the south-west of ditch 18032 and parallel with it, was found to lie under the remains of the gatehouse. This may have been a drainage gully marking the edge of agricultural activity in medieval or earlier times, or perhaps the eavesdrip of an earlier gatehouse. A sherd of wheel-turned redware (SF 18152) was recovered from it. The trench was 1m wide and 30 to 40cm deep (Illus 8.12, 8.15, 8.17). It had largely filled up with marsh sediment [18048], over which was a deposit of gravelly silt [18049] and a patch of burnt soil and charcoal [18047].



Illustration 8.15  
Trench 18, view of ditch 18050

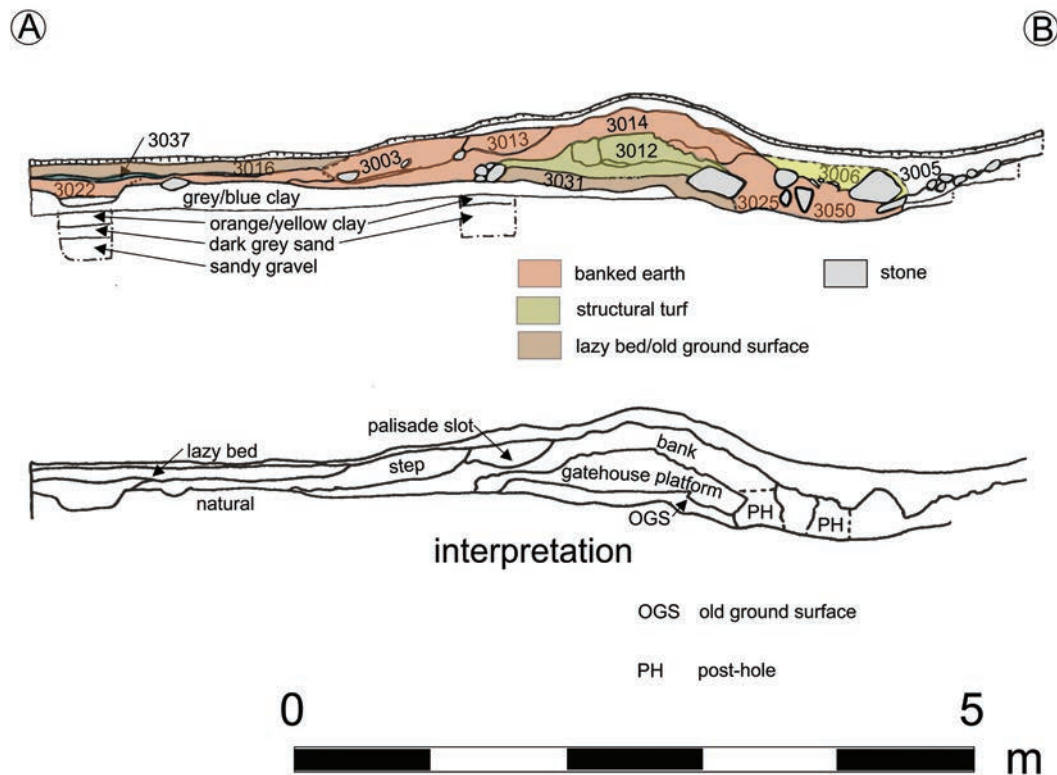


Illustration 8.16  
Trench 3, section A-B and interpretation



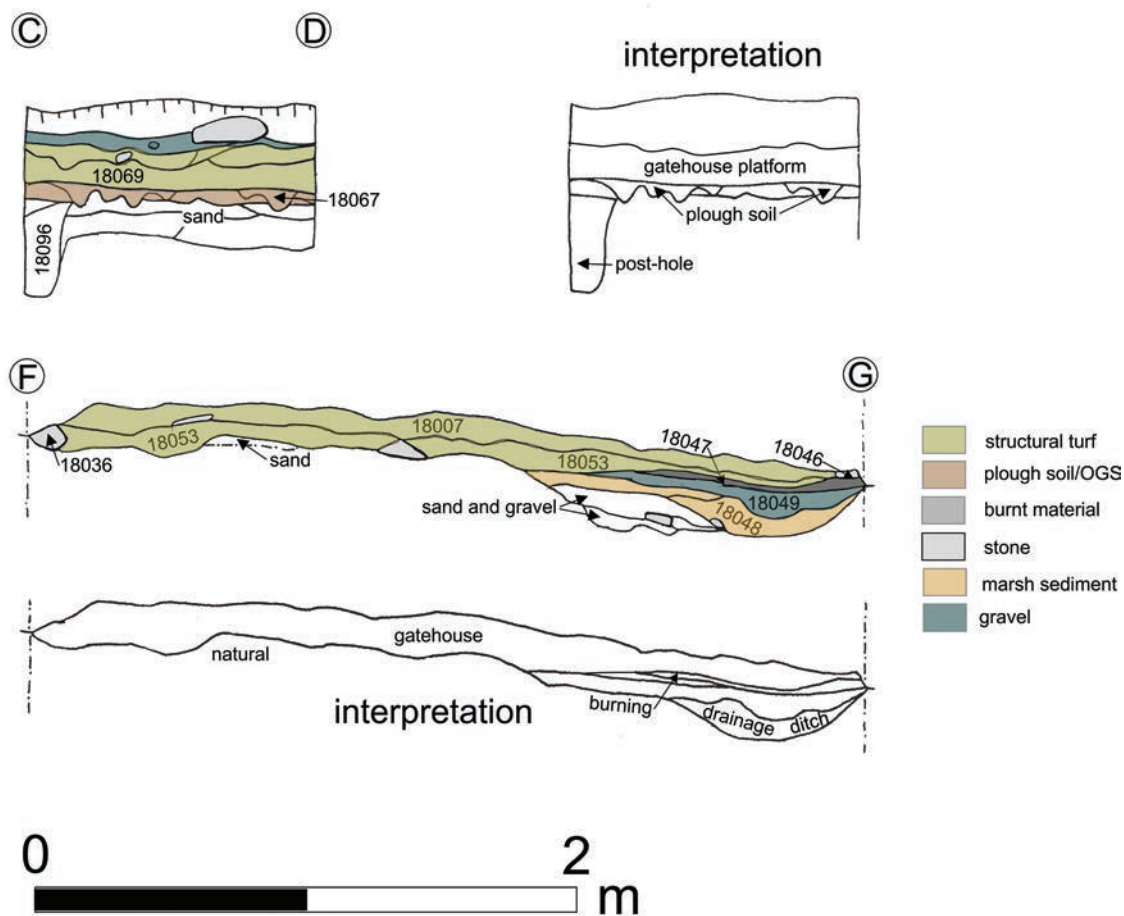


Illustration 8.17  
Trench 18, sections C–D and F–G and interpretations

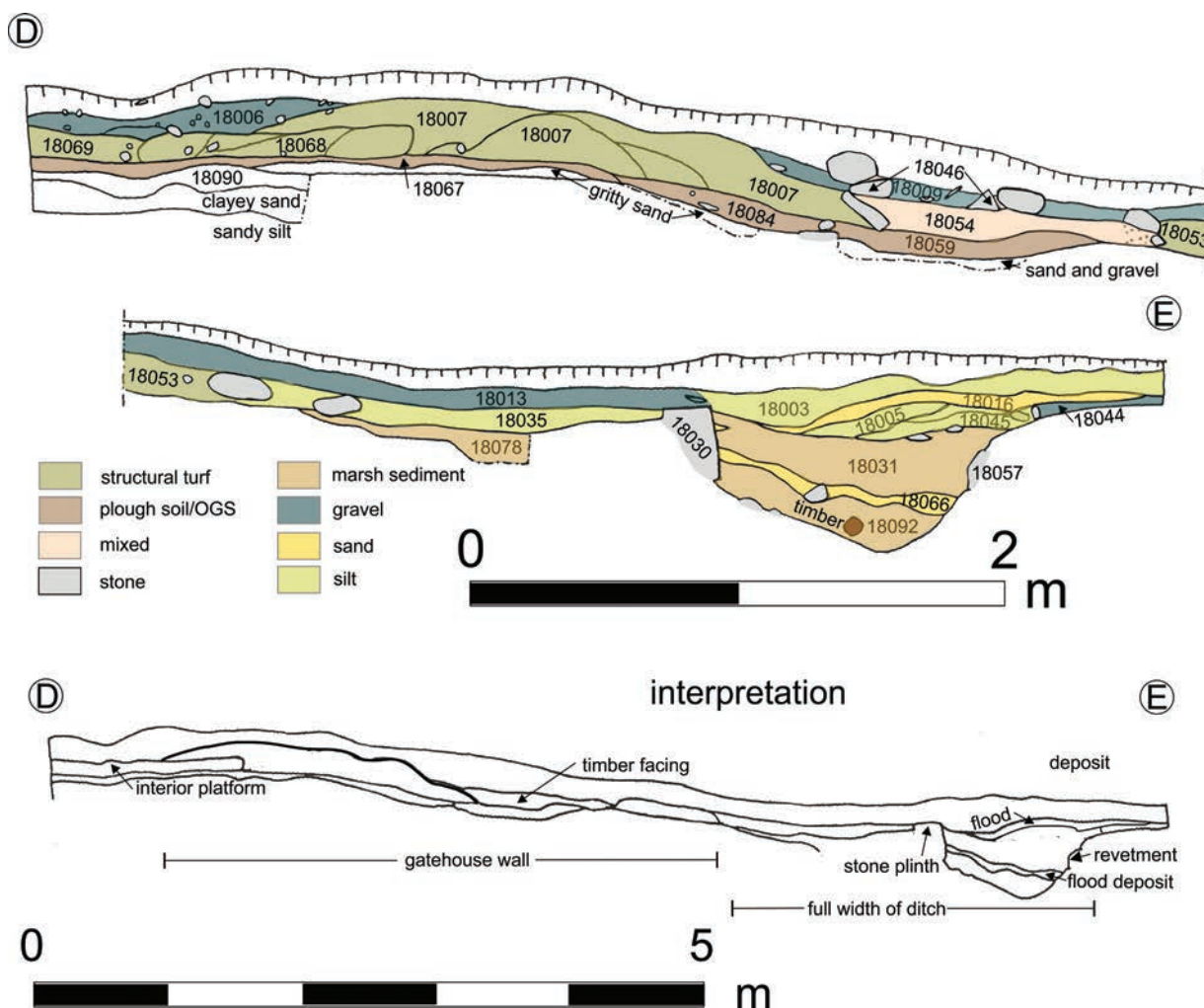


Illustration 8.18  
Trench 18, section D–E and interpretation

# EILEAN MÓR EXCAVATIONS IN THE AREA OF THE LAZY BEDS

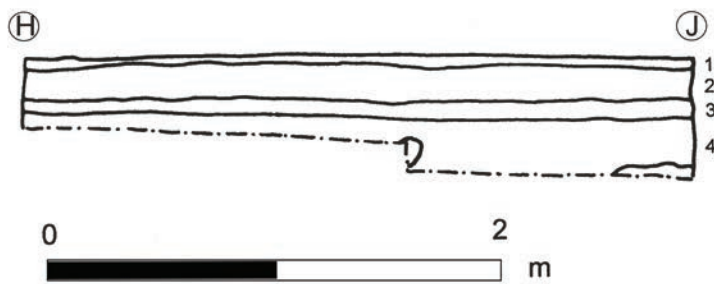


Illustration 8.19

Section H-J through the alluvial tail in a trial trench to the north-east of trench 18: (1) surface vegetation (modern root layer), up to 15cm thick; (2) very sticky gleyed clay (roots less abundant), up to 40cm thick; (3) dense organic marsh peat, up to 20cm thick; (4) coarse sand (not bottomed), its surface at about 52.60m OD

Context	Description	Interpretation
3003	Gritty humic soil	Step at back of palisade
3004	Boulders in dark brown earth	Packing for gatehouse uprights
3005	Earth and stones	Weathering, soil formation
3006	Yellow clay silt	Silting
3012	Green-grey clay	Turf platform for gatehouse
3013	Gritty soil	Fill of slot for palisade
3014	Light brown soil	Bank to support palisade
3015	Cut	Post-hole in palisade bank
3016	Grey stony clay	Lazy bed
3017	Cut	Palisade post-hole
3018	Cut	Palisade post-hole
3019	Cut	Palisade post-hole
3020	Cut	Post-hole in palisade bank
3021	Cut	Palisade post-hole
3022	Grey-brown clay	Fill of 3038
3025	Dark brown silty clay	Fill of gatehouse post-hole
3029	Dark brown earth, charcoal	Gatehouse destruction
3031	Dark soil deposit	Old ground surface
3032	Grey-blue clay	Natural
3034	Orange-yellow clay	Natural
3037	Gravel	Sorting by earthworms
3038	Cut	Post-hole
3039	Cut	Post-hole
3050	Dark brown silty clay	Fill of gatehouse post-hole
3058	Cut	Recent post-hole? (Unexcavated)
3061	Set stones	Gatehouse post-hole?

Table 8.1  
Trench 3 contexts

Of unknown date and significance were two truncated post-holes [3038, 3039] encountered in a sondage excavated in the north-west of trench 3 beneath the lazy bed [3016]; 3038 was 34cm and 3039 was 20cm in diameter. As with other features under the lazy beds in trench 19, they may provide a clue to the whole island being covered with houses and other structures in post-medieval, medieval or earlier times.

Beach sand and gravel deposits underlying plough soil [18067] and the remains of the gatehouse were sampled in a sondage at the north-west corner of trench 18. It was noted that they contained small flakes of worked flint, thought to represent Mesolithic activity. Unfortunately, the samples were lost prior to processing. Section C-D also shows a post-hole [18097] filled with sand [18096], of unknown date.

Context	Description	Interpretation
18037	Sand and silt	Flood deposit
18038	Silt	Silting
18039	Stone alignment	Outer edge of ditch 18032
18044	Gravelly surface	Causeway continuation
18045	Silt	Silting
18046	Boulders	Packing for gatehouse uprights
18047	Burnt soil, charcoal	Fill in ditch 18050
18048	Marsh sediment	Fill in ditch 18050
18049	Gravel	Fill in ditch 18050
18050	Cut	Drainage ditch
18053	Silt	Turf platform for gatehouse
18055	Stones	Cobbled causeway extension
18057	Stones	Revetment of ditch 18032
18059	Silty sand	Old ground surface
18064	Cut	Post-hole
18065	Clayey silt	Matrix of 18055
18066	Silty sand	Early flood deposit in 18032
18067	Grey-brown clayey sand	Early plough soil
18068	Silty sand	Turf platform for gatehouse
18069	Clayey silt	Turf platform for gatehouse
18078	Marsh sediment	Fill in ditch 18032
18084	Silty sand	Old ground surface
18086	Sandy silt	Fill in ditch 18050
18089	Gritty sandy clay	Flood deposit in extension
18090	Fine sand	Early activity
18092	Marsh sediment	Fill in ditch 18032
18096	Sand	Fill in 18097
18097	Cut	Post-hole

Table 8.2  
Trench 18 contexts



Context	Interpretation	SF no.	Type	Date	Notes
3002	Lazy bed	3015	Pottery	Early medieval	
3014	Palisade bank	3019	Copper peg	Early medieval	For musical instrument
3026	Gravel horizon	3018	Pottery	Early medieval	
3031	Old ground surface	3034	Pottery	Early medieval	
18002	Gatehouse debris	18002	Coin	Early medieval	Henry III (1247–72) 1d
18002	Gatehouse debris	18006	Pottery	Early medieval	
18002	Gatehouse debris	18007	Pottery	Early medieval	
18003	Silting	18079	Lead shot	Post-medieval	
18006	Gatehouse debris	18011	Pottery	Early medieval	
18006	Gatehouse debris	18027	Pottery	Early medieval	
18006	Gatehouse debris	18028	Pottery	Early medieval	
18006	Gatehouse debris	18036	Pottery	Early medieval	
18007	Gatehouse turf work	18067	Pottery	Early medieval	
18007	Gatehouse turf work	18068	Pottery	Early medieval	
18007	Gatehouse turf work	18073	Pottery	Early medieval	
18007	Gatehouse turf work	18075	Pottery	Early medieval	
18007	Gatehouse turf work	18083	Pottery	Early medieval	
18007	Gatehouse turf work	18097	Pottery	Early medieval	
18007	Gatehouse turf work	18097	Roof slate	Medieval/post-medieval	
18007	Gatehouse turf work	18103	Pottery	Early medieval	
18007	Gatehouse turf work	18171	Roof slate	Medieval/post-medieval	
18013	Gatehouse debris	18156	Pottery	Early medieval	
18015	Gatehouse debris	18042	Pottery	Early medieval	
18015	Gatehouse debris	18043	Pottery	Early medieval	
18015	Gatehouse debris	18044	Pottery	Early medieval	
18015	Gatehouse debris	18047	Pottery	Early medieval	
18015	Gatehouse debris	18060	Pottery	Early medieval	
18015	Gatehouse debris	18061	Arrowhead	Early medieval/medieval	
18015	Gatehouse debris	18064	Pottery	Early medieval	
18015	Gatehouse debris	18065	Pottery	Early medieval	
18015	Gatehouse debris	18067	Pottery	Early medieval	
18015	Gatehouse debris	18076	Pottery	Early medieval	
18015	Gatehouse debris	18077	Pottery	Early medieval	
18015	Gatehouse debris	18078	Pottery	Early medieval	
18015	Gatehouse debris	18078	Roof slate	Medieval/post-medieval	Type A
18017	Gatehouse debris	18023	Pottery	Early medieval	
18035	Silting	18096	Glass	Modern	
18040	Gatehouse turf work	18100	Pottery	Early medieval	
18041	Gatehouse turf work	18091	Pottery	Early medieval	
18053	Gatehouse turf work	18109	Pottery	Early medieval	
18053	Gatehouse turf work	18123	Pottery	Early medieval	
18065	Causeway/access route	18126	Pottery	Early medieval	
18065	Causeway/access route	18132	Copper pin	Early medieval	
18086	Fill of palisade slot	18152	Pottery	Early medieval/medieval	Handmade
18089	Silting	18157	Pottery	Early medieval	

Table 8.3  
Selected small finds from trenches 3 and 18

**Dating evidence (Table 8.3)**

A musical instrument peg of medieval type (C121) came from the bank [3014] and a fragment of a 13th-century long cross penny (N9) was recovered from weathered demolition debris [18002] over the top of the gatehouse.

Other apparent dating evidence was provided by the 50 sherds of pottery from trenches 3 and 18. Of these, 36 were wheel-made, all of Scottish origin: 30 white gritty, 1 redware and 5 oxidised gritty ware. Almost all of them were associated with the gatehouse rather than any other feature, many of them being incorporated in its structure, including its platform and walls.

None of these finds, however, necessarily date the construction or use of the gatehouse and bank and palisade. One sherd of white gritty (SF 3034) came from the old land surface [3031] under the gatehouse, and possibly does indicate occupation or land use in this immediate area of Eilean Mór in the earlier medieval period. The rest of the finds, including the musical instrument peg and coin, may have been grubbed up from earlier occupation material in the immediate locality. White gritty ware is believed to be no earlier than the 12th century, and perhaps much of that recovered from Finlaggan dates to the 13th century. Another sherd of white gritty pottery (SF 18126) was recovered in the make-up [18065] of the cobbled path extending from the causeway, as well as an earlier medieval copper-alloy dress pin (C10). These may be an indication that the causeway, and access to Eilean Mór across the ditch, dates to earlier medieval times.

Finally, and most importantly, there is the evidence provided by five pieces of roof slates recovered from trench 18, three of type A, one of type B and one of type C (see Chapter C2 in the Catalogue for an explanation of slate types). Two of these were unstratified and a third came from silting [18035]. A fourth (SF 18078) was recovered from collapsed gatehouse debris [18015]. The fifth (SF 18171) was found in the turf wall [18007] of the gatehouse. These are not considered to be evidence for how the gatehouse was roofed. It would be remarkable if the destruction or demolition of such a roof would have left so few pieces of slate. Some medieval buildings on Eilean Mór, including the great hall and the chapel, were covered with slates. After the great hall was dismantled, apparently about 1500, it seems that some of its roof slates were recycled, especially for drain covers in building 12.5. We suppose that the slates listed here are only likely to have become available post-1500. Our excavations elsewhere on Eilean Mór also demonstrated that pieces of roof slate became fairly widely scattered post-1500 and the presence of a piece in the walling of the gatehouse may indicate that the turf for building it was dug up on the island.

We are, therefore, of the view that the gatehouse was built some time in the 16th century. The short length of bank and palisade excavated in trench 3 post-dated the destruction of the gatehouse, perhaps later in the 16th century.

**Interpretation (Illus 8.20)**

The turf platform and walls of the gatehouse were piled straight on to ground at the edge of the island proper in the earlier 16th century, although there must by that time have been a considerable area of marsh between it and the head of the loch, albeit not so large as the tail so much in evidence today. When constructed, the gatehouse may have been the main entrance to Eilean Mór,

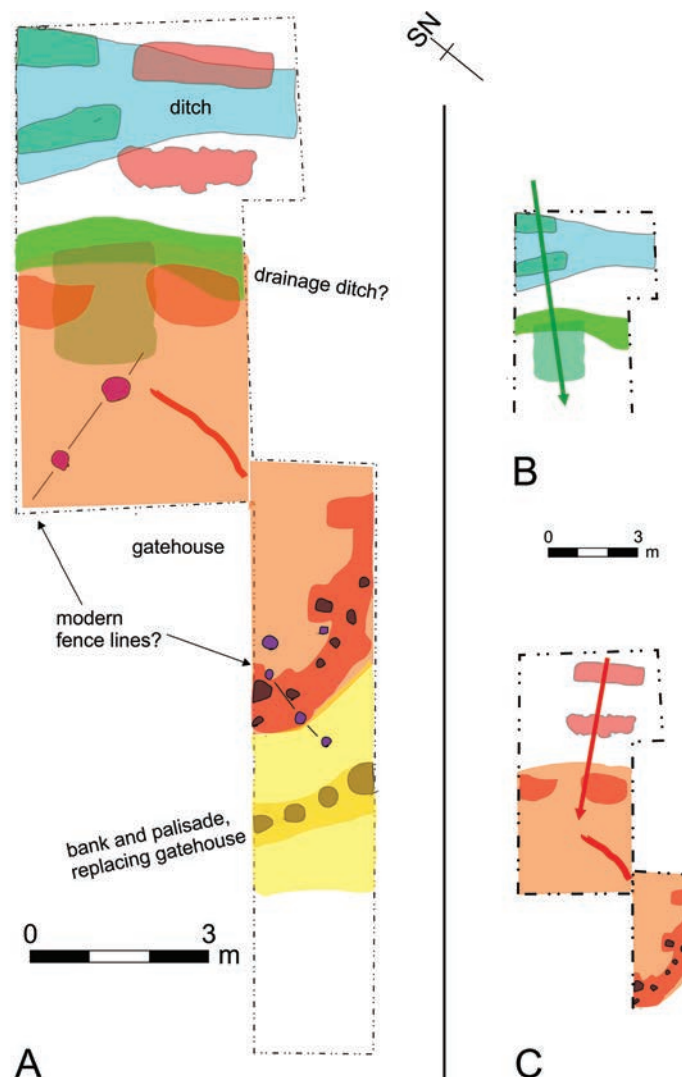


Illustration 8.20

Trenches 3 and 18: (A) composite interpretative plan; (B) earlier medieval access to Eilean Mór from a causeway, across a ditch; (C) post-medieval gatehouse accessed from the alluvial tail by a bridge

approached by a timber bridge, and possibly a walkway through the Finlaggan Marsh, replacing access by boat. It was part of a larger scheme of timberwork defences, of which more later.

Thick turf walls gave the gatehouse a considerable degree of solidity, but it would have appeared externally as a circular or polygonal wooden structure. A number of rivets or clench bolts found in the excavations may indicate how it was finished. These rivets were essentially for fastening together thin planks of wood, for example on the hull of a clinker-built boat. A similar exterior skin of overlapping weather boards on the gatehouse would have been a sensible way of preventing slippage or erosion from the turf walls.

No clues were provided as to the height of the gatehouse, but the solidity of the timberwork, with a ring of uprights braced by large timbers behind, is surely an indication that it rose to some height, perhaps in the form of a more open fighting-deck or battlements.

The rivets are broken apart and there are traces of burning in the form of pieces of charcoal and burnt clay from debris associated with the demise of the gatehouse, including contexts 18015, 18017 and 18006. Although other flecks of charcoal noted in several



contexts excavated in trench 18 may be wind-borne or washed in from elsewhere, or indeed related to domestic activities, the possibility that they resulted from the deliberate destruction and demolition of the gatehouse cannot lightly be dismissed.

More tentatively, a question might be posed as to whether the demise of the gatehouse involved military action. This could be suggested by the presence of two pieces of lead shot (SF 18170, 18079), one unstratified, the other from subsoil, plus an arrowhead (SF 18061) probably of military type from destruction deposits.

The gatehouse was already demolished when the bank was erected on its back edge to provide support for a palisade. Possibly this palisade was merely bridging the gap in the island's defences caused by the removal of the gatehouse. No ironwork was recovered, in an admittedly limited area of excavation, in convincing association with the palisade slot and post-holes. The diameters and spacing of its uprights, however, would have been ideal for interweaving wands of hazel or oak. Such a wattle fence would have been very sturdy, and a considerable defensive barrier rising from a bank around the water's edge with a step inside for its defenders to stand on.

Earlier in date than both the gatehouse and the bank and palisade was the stone causeway connecting Eilean Mór with the loch shore. From the edge of the island it continued as a cobbled path, bridging a ditch which may have been as much about water management and limiting encroachment by the Finlaggan Marsh as defence against hostile humans. Causeway and ditch may be of earlier medieval date, as also the gully or trench [1850], identified as for drainage rather than anything to do with defence. The causeway and ditch were most likely to have been long out of use by the time the gatehouse and its wooden access bridge were erected.

The traces of earlier activity, including the sherds of white gritty pottery and the plough marks under the gatehouse, are not much of a basis for reconstructing how this part of the island was used in medieval times. The agricultural activity represented by the lazy beds inside the line of the palisade appears to be of more recent date than, or to have carried on after, the erection of the palisade.

### The lazy beds and trench 19 (Illus 6.6, 6.10, 8.21)

#### *Geophysical surveys*

In 1992 two geophysical surveys, using a metal detector and a fluxgate gradiometer, were carried out in the area of lazy beds on Eilean Mór to assess whether these might overlie the remains of earlier structures (Illus 8.22). For the metal detector – in the hands of an experienced operator, Roger McWee – an area about 900 sq m was laid out and systematically swept. It was reasoned that any significant clusters of iron readings might be a clue to the presence of ruined houses or other structures. 'Hot spots' were marked with canes and plotted in with EDM. An attempt was made to distinguish signals made by different metals,

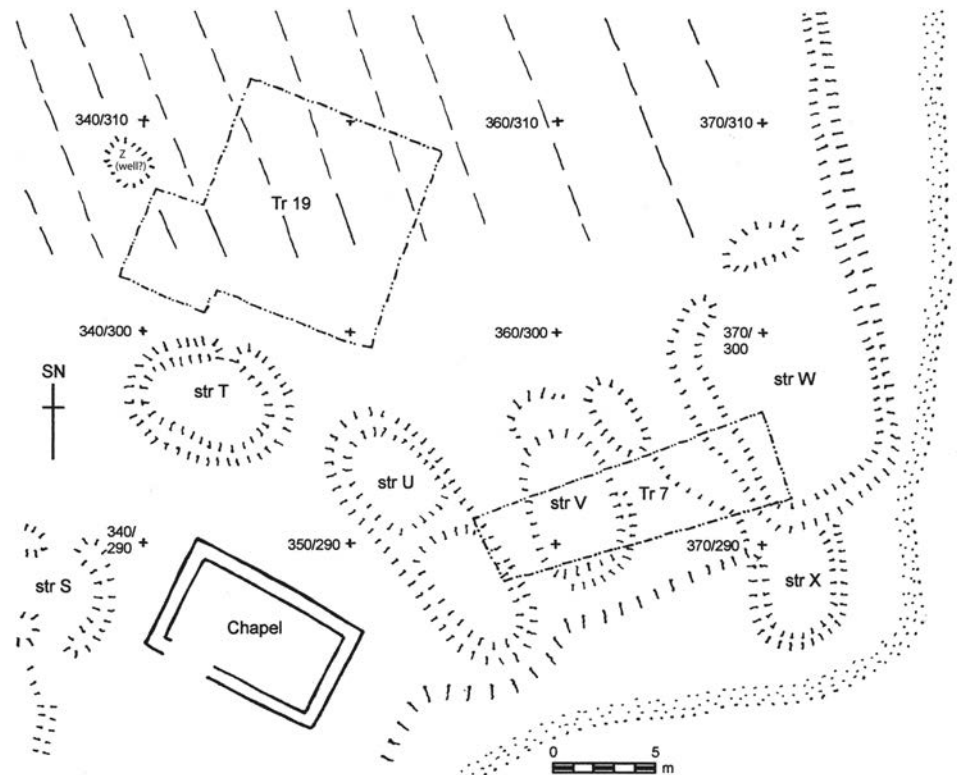


Illustration 8.21  
Location map for trenches 19 and 7

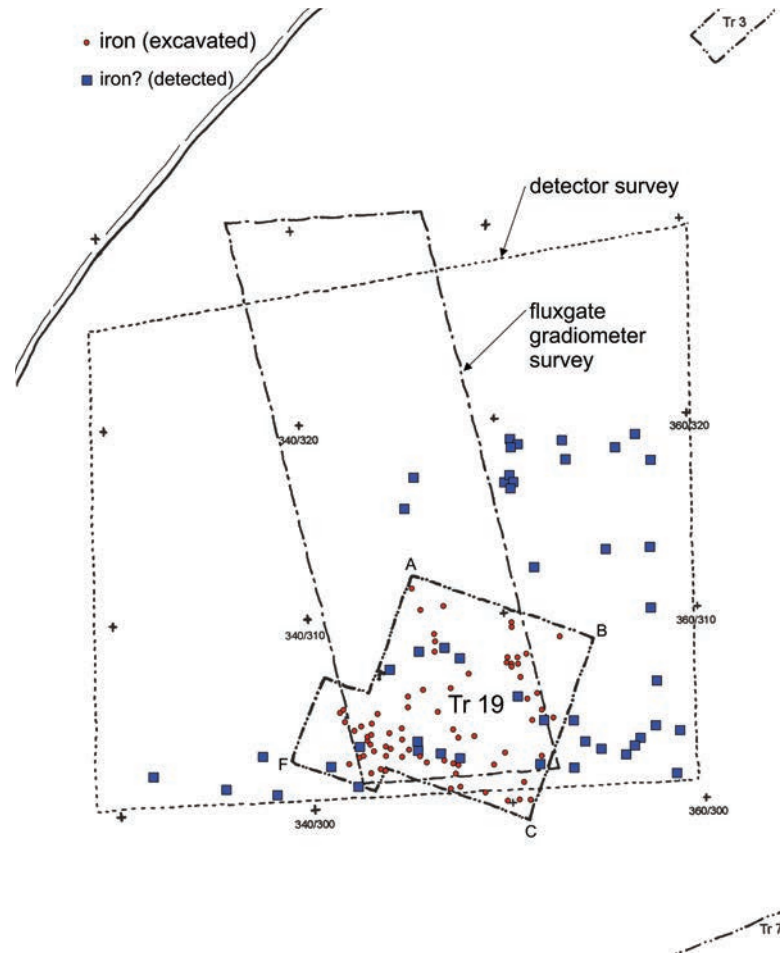


Illustration 8.22  
Location of geophysical surveys, using a metal detector and a fluxgate gradiometer, carried out in the area of lazy beds on Eilean Mór

## EILEAN MÓR EXCAVATIONS IN THE AREA OF THE LAZY BEDS

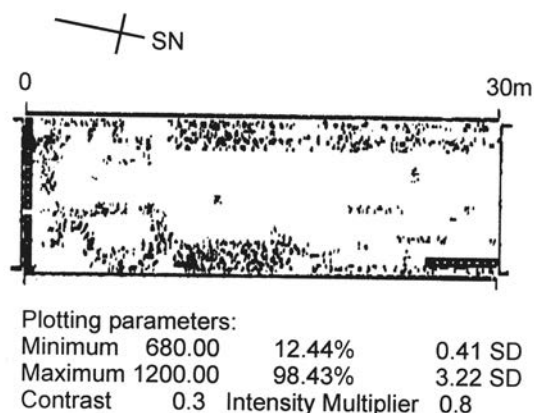


Illustration 8.23

Plot of the readings from the fluxgate gradiometer survey on Eilean Mór

resulting in 3 possible copper alloy and 47 iron readings. They were grouped along the southern edge of the area and in the south-east quadrant below buildings T, U and V on the higher ground. No attempt was made to dig and check any of the signals.

For the fluxgate gradiometer survey, a strip 10 by 30m was laid out within the area of the metal detector survey (Illus 8.23). The readings from this seemed to reflect the linearity of the lazy beds. There was also a strong impression of what appeared to be a two-roomed, sub-rectangular or oval house, coinciding with a concentration of 12 or so iron readings.

### Trench 19 (Illus 8.24–27, Table 8.4)

Trench 19 was excavated in 1994 and was deliberately placed to examine the supposed house predicted by our interpretation of the geophysical data. Excavation, however, was to demonstrate that this picture was misleading. It became evident that the metal detector only recorded a few items near the ground surface, and with the benefit of hindsight the supposed structure appeared to a large extent to reflect concentrations of stones in the underlying natural deposits, especially 19013 and 19015.

The natural deposits were mostly a compacted clay soil, oxidised red, containing several large stones [19018]. It was largely made up of weathered quartzite, giving a sandy, gritty texture. In the north-west corner of the trench it was grey [19015] as a result of waterlogging. A band of small stones [19013] in a matrix of clay silt, overlying sand [19068, 19040], stretched along the base of the chapel, representing an early shoreline at a height of about 53.90 OD (Illus 8.30).

As initially laid out, the trench was 10 by 10m, here described as if it had the same orientation as the site grid. The whole of it was excavated down to natural deposits. At a later stage a further area of about 12m<sup>2</sup> was opened up at its south-west corner, but only the topmost deposits in it were examined (Illus 8.25). Apart from the lazy beds, some 10 structures were defined, most on the basis of selecting patterns of post-holes.

### Lazy beds (Illus 8.26, 8.27)

No precise dating material was collected for the construction and cultivation of the lazy beds, but their form was obvious, with evidence for the use of turfs and little sign of post-use deformation.



Illustration 8.24

Trench 19, general view looking northwards of excavation in progress, after removal of lazy beds



Illustration 8.25

Trench 19, the extension with the post-holes of structure 19.9 partially excavated in the soil of the lazy beds. At the bottom right, excavation has exposed an earlier surface. Note the piece of roof slate with a peg-hole

A total of five beds were partially excavated [19141, 19112, 19006, 19007, 19140]. They were about 3m wide, rising to a height of about 0.3m (excluding turf covering). They were separated by furrows, 0.5 to 0.75m wide. The ends of all but 19140 were located in the trench, just where the ground started to rise appreciably towards the chapel.

Underlying the lazy beds was a gravelly horizon [19003, 19136, 19137], the result of sorting by earthworms. From 19136 and 19137, in the south-western extension of the trench (Illus 8.25), were recovered several fragments of roof slate, probably from the ruin of the chapel.

### Structure 19.1

In the south and south-west of the trench and the extension was a group of at least six post-holes arranged in a straight line stretching from north-west to south-east (Illus 8.26, 8.35). It was thought likely that all were of relatively recent date, perhaps contemporary



Context	Description	Interpretation
19003	Sandy loam, gravel	Subsoil under lazy beds
19004	Stones	Wall of str 19.2
19005	Stones	Wall of str 19.2
19006	Clay silt	Lazy bed
19007	Silty clay	Lazy bed
19008	Silty loam	Subsoil
19009	Clay silt	Floor deposit, str 19.2
19010	Stones	Tumble
19012	Silty clay, sand, gravel	Occupation deposit, str 19.10
19013	Boulders in clay silt	Early shore
19014	Clayey silt, charcoal flecks	Occupation deposit, str 19.10
19015	Silty clay, stones	Natural leached horizon
19017	Silt, charcoal flecks	Hearth, str 19.7
19018	Silty clay, stones	Natural
19020	Silty clay, stones, charcoal	Fill of 19022, str 19.7
19022	Cut	Pit, str 19.7
19023	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.4
19024	Clay silt, stones, charcoal	Fill of 19023, str 19.4
19025	Cut	Hearth, str 19.6
19026	Silty clay, stones, charcoal	Fill of 19025, str 19.6
19027	Stones	Fill of 19025, str 19.6
19028	Silty sand, stones, charcoal	Fill of 19029, str 19.2
19030	Cut, lined with stones	Post-hole, str 19.4
19031	Sandy silt, stones	Fill of 19030, str 19.4
19032	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.3
19033	Sandy silt, stones	Fill of 19032, str 19.3
19034	Cut	Post-hole
19035	Silty sand	Fill of 19034
19036	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.1
19038	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.8
19039	Silty clay, stones, charcoal	Fill of 19038, str 19.8
19040	Silty sand, stones	Natural
19044	Cut	Hearth, str 19.10
19045	Silty clay	Fill of 19044, str 19.10
19047	Silty clay, stones	Natural
19048	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.3
19050	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.5
19051	Silty clay, stones, charcoal	Fill of 19050, str 19.5
19054	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.8
19055	Clay silt, charcoal	Fill of 19054, str 19.8
19056	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.3
19057	Silty sand, gravel	Fill of 19056, str 19.3
19058	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.9
19060	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.3, 19.8
19061	Clay silt	Fill of 19060, str 19.8
19063	Clay, stones, charcoal	Fill of 19048, str 19.3
19064	Silty clay, stones	Fill of 19025, str 19.6
19065	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.3
19066	Silty clay, gravel	Natural
19067	Clay, oxidised red	Natural

Context	Description	Interpretation
19068	Sand	Early shore
19069	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.3
19070	Clay	Fill of 19065, str 19.3
19071	Clay loam, stones	Fill of 19060, str 19.8
19072	Silty clay, stones	Fill of 19060, str 19.3
19073	Sandy silt, stones	Fill of 19065, str 19.3
19074	Silty clay	Fill of 19065, str 19.3
19075	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.4
19076	Silty sand, stones	Fill of 19075, str 19.4
19077	Cut	Post-hole
19079	Sandy silt	Fill of post-hole, str 19.4
19082	Silty sand, charcoal flecks	Fill of 19108, str 19.1
19085	Silty sand, charcoal	Fill of 19100, str 19.4
19091	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.1
19093	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.1
19095	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.1
19097	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.1
19100	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.4
19101	Cut	Post-hole
19102	Silty sand	Fill of 19107, str 19.8
19103	Silty sand	Fill of 19106, str 19.5
19104	Silty sand	Fill of 19105, str 19.3, 19.5
19105	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.3, 19.5
19106	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.5
19107	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.8
19108	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.1
19109	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.1
19112	Silty clay	Lazy bed
19122	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.9
19124	Cut	Post-hole
19125	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.1
19126	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.9
19127	Cut	Post-hole
19128	Cut	Post-hole
19129	Cut	Post-hole
19130	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.9
19131	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.9
19132	Cut	Post-hole
19133	Cut	Post-hole
19134	Cut	Pit
19136	Gravel, coarse silty sand	Subsoil under lazy beds
19137	Gravel	Subsoil
19138	Sandy silt	Fill of 19139
19139	Cut	Post-hole
19140	Clay silt	Lazy bed
19141	Clay silt	Lazy bed
19143	Cut	Post-hole, str 19.1
19144	Sandy silt	Fill of 19069, str 19.3
19145	Clay silt	Subsoil
19146	Silty loam	Subsoil

Table 8.4  
Trench 19 contexts

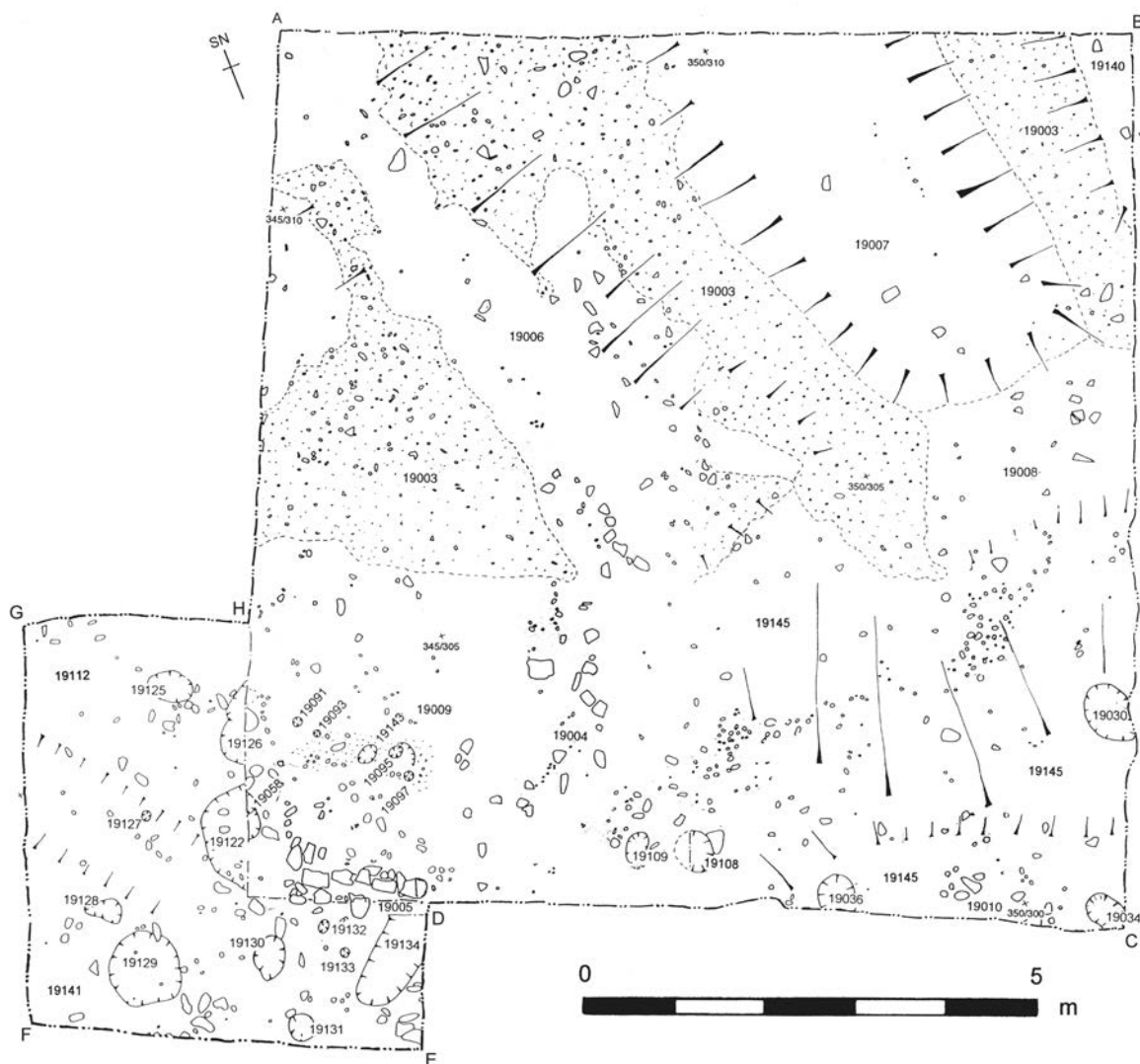


Illustration 8.26  
Trench 19, lazy beds and other features

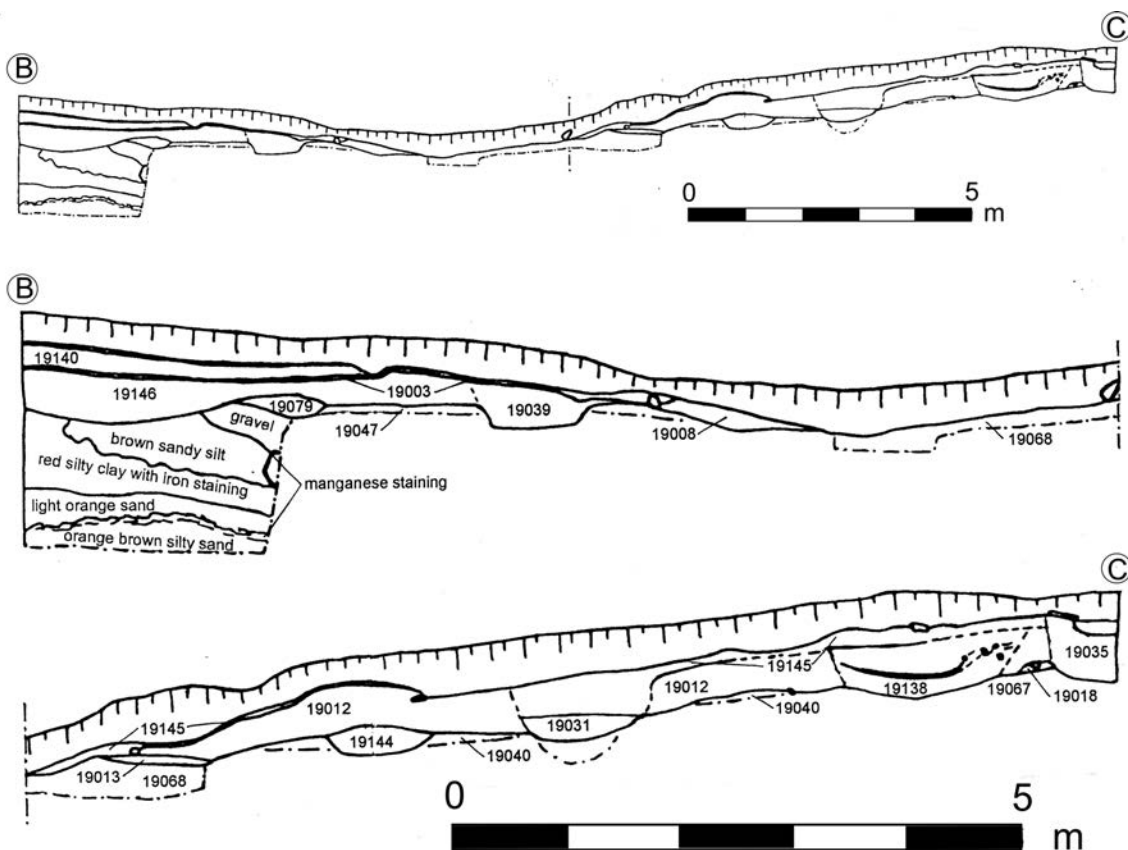


Illustration 8.27  
Trench 19, west-facing section along east edge of trench

with some of the agricultural activity that led to the creation of the lazy beds. The five main post-holes on this alignment were 19125, 19095, 19109, 19108 and 19036. All had a diameter of about 40cm or less and there was no evidence in them for posts. They were spaced at about 2m intervals with 19108 possibly being a replacement for 19109. Post-hole 19125 was cut through a lazy bed, while 19036 was sealed by 19145, a thin layer of clay silt containing stones, pottery and nails, possibly debris spilling downslope from buildings T and U. Structure 19.1 can tentatively be identified as the remains of a fence.

#### Structures 19.2, 19.9, 19.10 (Illus 8.28, 8.29, 8.35)

Also in the south-west corner of the original trench, the remains of two lines or spreads of stones [19004, 19005] were identified, perhaps representing the vestigial traces of internal faces of turf walls. They enclosed two sides of an area of clay silt deposits [19009] interpreted as an associated floor deposit. These together have been labelled as structure 19.2. All had been much disturbed by subsequent agricultural activity. From 19009 came a quantity of fragments of iron, mostly apparently nails rather than rivets, and also several sherds of pottery. These included 163 pieces of hand-made pot and one sherd of Scottish redware (SF 19128). A post-medieval (16th-century) date for 19.2 seems likely since 19005 incorporated a piece of white sandstone roof ridge (SF 19047) thought to have come from one of the later medieval slate-roofed buildings which would have been dismantled in the 1490s or later. Another piece (SF 19040) was found in the topsoil at the north end of the trench.

A hearth [19028], consisting of a circular patch of silt with ash, charcoal and burnt bone, about 0.6m in diameter, in a shallow scoop in the natural, was located beyond these floor deposits but may, nevertheless, have been associated with them



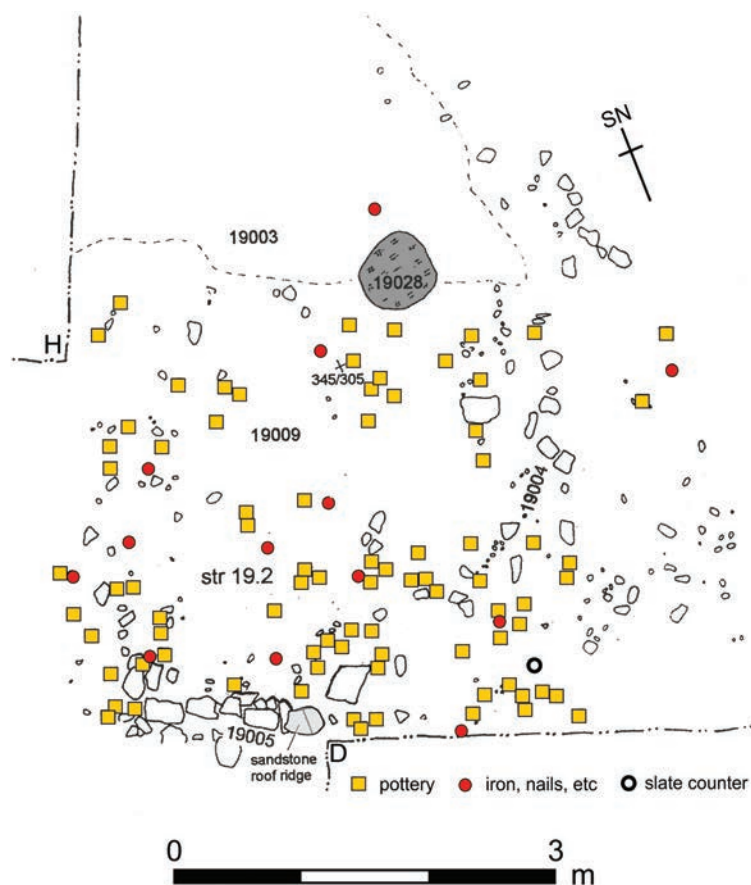


Illustration 8.28  
Trench 19, structure 19.2

before the disturbance caused by the digging of the lazy beds. This hearth was sealed by gravelly spread 19003, a subsoil deposit associated with the lazy beds, but the context from which its scoop was dug was lost. The evidence of features and finds together can be used, tentatively, to identify the vestigial remains of a barrel-shaped house with a central fireplace, with its long axis oriented approximately (site) south-west to north-east.

To the south-west of structure 19.2, in the extension to the trench which was not fully excavated, were several post-holes sealed by the topsoil, including four which may have belonged together, 19131, 19130, 19122 and 19126 (Illus 8.26). They formed an arc just to the west of the expected position of the west wall of 19.2, and extended southwards from it. They were labelled 19.9 and may be of more recent date than structure 19.2.

Sealed by the floor of 19.2 was an earlier deposit of silty clay [19012], mixed with sand and gravel, extending the full width of the trench as originally dug but eaten away to the north by the lazy beds. The artefacts associated with it included fragments of nails and two sherds of wheel-made pottery – one of redware (SF 19354) and the other of oxidised gritty (SF 19383). Dug in it was a shallow circular scoop [19044, 19045] about 0.4m in diameter surrounded by a crude setting of stones and reused roof slates, forming a hearth. Deposit 19012 also contained patches of darker brown, interpreted as decomposed turf, and there was more of this turfy material in 19014, a deposit of clayey silt with flecks of charcoal. It lay adjacent and to the north of 19012 and was stratigraphically earlier. Both 19012 and 19014, together with the hearth 19044, are reckoned to be the tenuous traces of at least one further house, structure 19.10. The pieces of turf perhaps represented the tumbled remains of walling. It may also be of post-medieval date, the roof slates only becoming available for recycling from the 1490s.

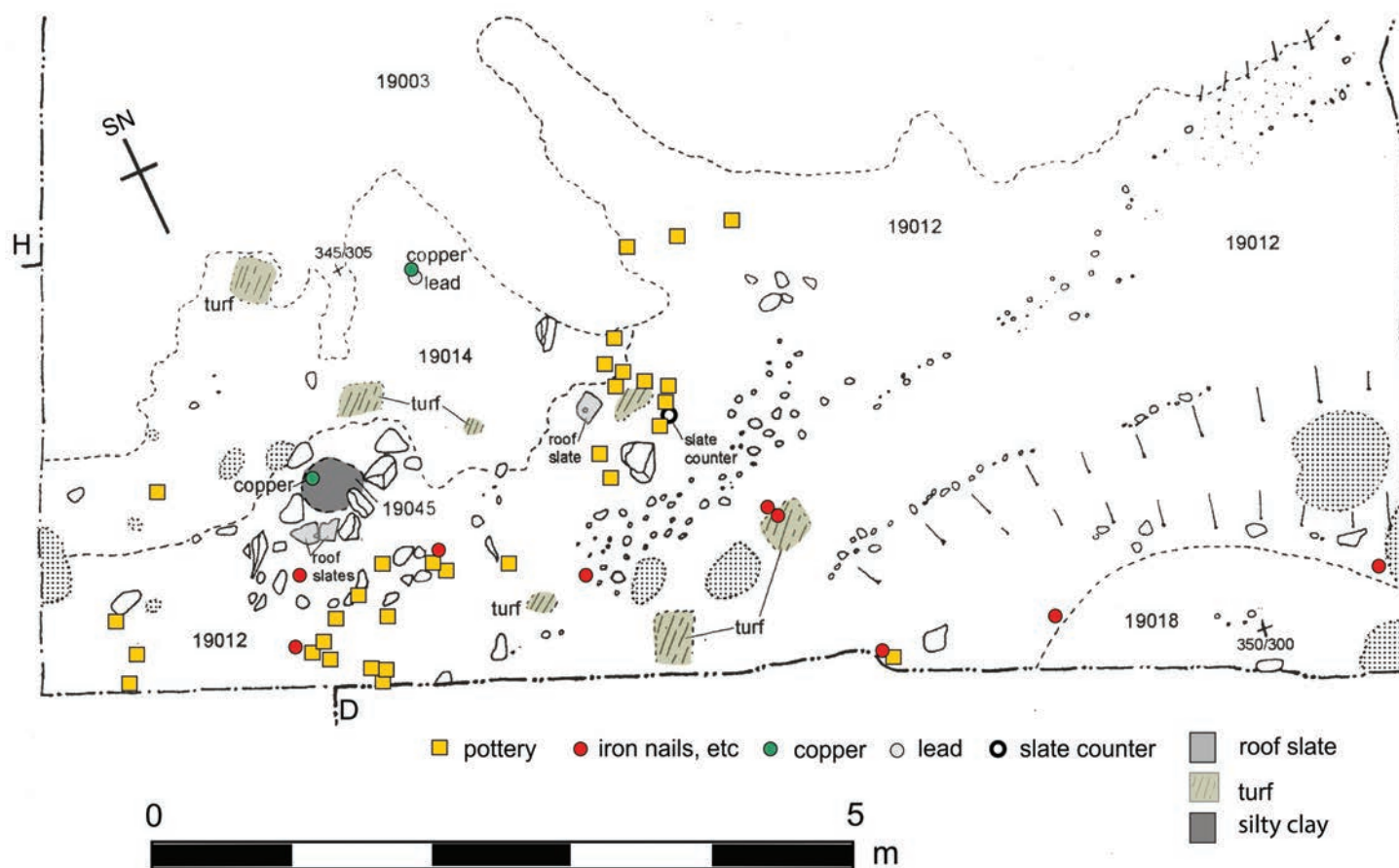


Illustration 8.29  
Trench 19, tenuous traces of a house (?), structure 19.10

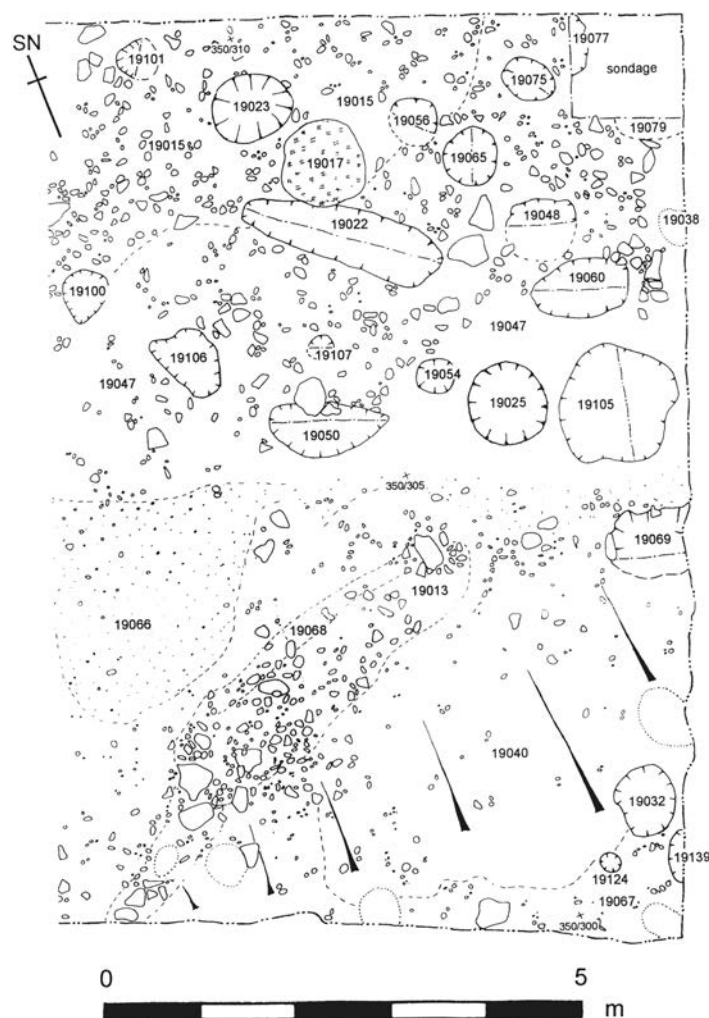


Illustration 8.30

Trench 19, plan of pits and other features under the lazy beds



Illustration 8.31

Trench 19, pits and other features under the lazy beds, looking south. Pit 19022 (structure 19.7) is located centrally between the drawing frame and the blackboard

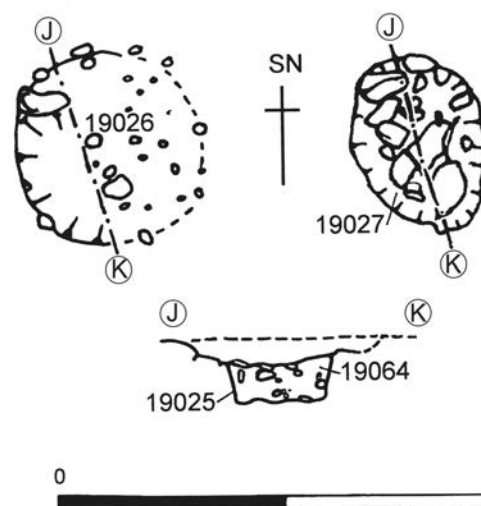


Illustration 8.32

Trench 19, plans and section of structure 19.6

### Structures 19.3–8 (Illus 8.30, 8.31, 8.34, 8.35)

Under the lazy beds and cut into the natural in the main area of the trench were found several truncated pits with no direct stratigraphic relationships to each other.

Structure 19.6 (Illus 8.32, 8.33) consisted solely of a circular, flat-bottomed pit [19025] 0.8m in diameter and 0.2m deep. It was mostly filled with a deposit [19064] of silty clay and stones, over the surface of which was a dished arrangement of flat stones [19027] containing a deposit [19026] of more silty clay, with charcoal and sherds of a Bronze Age food vessel type pot (SF 19524–26). This suggested that structure 19.6 should be interpreted as the remains of a hearth, but there appeared to be no obvious relationships with any of the other structures in trench 19.

Structure 19.7 was represented by a contiguous hearth and pit (Illus 8.30, 8.34, 8.35). When first discovered it was expected that the pit [19022], oval in shape, about 2.2 by 0.6m and 0.3m deep, aligned east–west, would turn out to be a grave, but no traces of a body were detected in it, and on-site phosphate tests provided no supporting evidence for one. The evidence for this can be found on



Illustration 8.33

Trench 19, structure 19.6



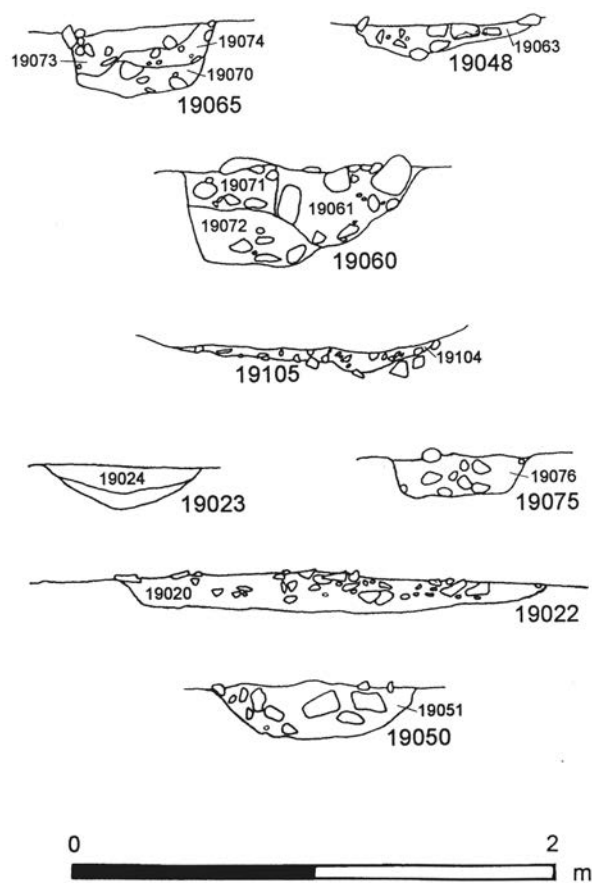


Illustration 8.34  
Trench 19, sections of pits and other features

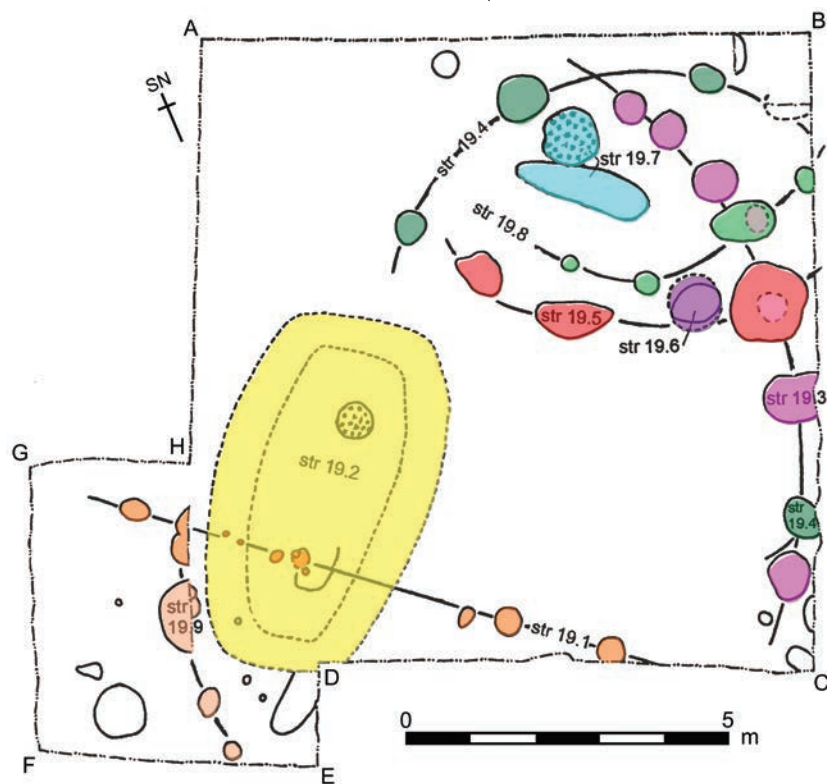


Illustration 8.35  
Trench 19, interpretation of main features

pages 16–17 of the Environmental Notebook, now in the site archive. Its fill [19020] of silty clay and stones included charcoal, and from its bottom came an iron nail (SF 19392). An alternative explanation for it is that it held a cooking trough, heated with red-hot stones from the neighbouring hearth [19017], represented by a circular patch, 0.9m in diameter, of ash and charcoal. As with the hearth 19.6 it is not clear that this pit and hearth can be associated with any of the groups of post-holes in the trench.

The rest of the pits in this area of the trench were evidently post-holes, although no post-pipes or packing stones were detected in their fills (Illus 8.30, 8.34). The interpretative plan (Illus 8.35) demonstrates how most of them can be grouped into arcs, and four, 19.3–5 and 19.8, are indicated as possible structures. Table 8.5 gives the main features of each post-hole assigned to one or other of these structures.

On the assumption that these groupings into four structures are valid, the order in which three were built and used can be deduced since a post-hole of 19.3 was cut into a post-hole of 19.5, and a post-hole of 19.8 was cut into one of 19.3. That only excluded 19.4 from this chronological sequence and so it was not possible to place it reliably. The presence of an iron nail in the fill of one of its post-holes was at least an indication that it was later than 19.3, since the latter had two of its holes sealed by medieval

Structure	Post-hole		Size in cm	Fills	Sealed by	Finds
19.3	19056		56×44×15	19057	Lazy beds	
	19065	Recut	53×53×17	19073	Lazy beds	Prehistoric pot
	19048		70×40×13	19063	Lazy beds	
	19060		90×75×40	19071/72	Str 19.8	
	19105	Recut	48×48×9	19104	Topsoil	
19.4	19069		48×?×11	19144	Medieval	
	19032		60×50×13	19033	Medieval	
	19100		60×50×14	19085	Lazy beds	
	19023		75×65×27	19024	Lazy beds	Nail
	19075		65×40×25	19076	Lazy beds	
19.5	19079				Lazy beds	
	19030		60×50×20	19031	Topsoil	Prehistoric pot
	19106		80×60×12	19103	Lazy beds	
	19050		95×60×25	19051	Lazy beds	
	19105		150×150×20	19104	Str 19.3	
19.8	19107		18×18×8	19102	Lazy beds	
	19054		54×35×13	19055	Lazy beds	
	19060	Recut	56×56×31	19061	Lazy beds	
	19038		45×35×8	19039	Lazy beds	

Table 8.5  
Trench 19 post-holes

## EILEAN MÓR EXCAVATIONS IN THE AREA OF THE LAZY BEDS

deposits and a third containing prehistoric pottery. We may therefore, tentatively, place 19.4 later than 19.3 and 19.5, and possibly 19.8. On the further assumption that these arcs of post-holes formed complete circles, it was possible to calculate the diameters of the circles so formed. The main features of each structure can thus be listed as follows:

- Structure 19.4: diameter  $\approx$  8m, possibly more recent than structure 19.8
- Structure 19.8: diameter  $\approx$  6.4
- Structure 19.3: diameter  $\approx$  14.4m, earlier than structure 19.8, probably prehistoric
- Structure 19.5: diameter  $\approx$  8m, earlier than structure 19.3.

### *Interpretation*

No precise date can be offered for the creation of the lazy beds. They clearly post-dated structure 19.2, which included in its walling sandstone roof ridge from a building with a slate roof. The most likely source for it was the chapel, or else the great hall. The evidence presented later in this volume suggests that the chapel remained in use in the 16th century, but the great hall was dismantled in the 1490s. This indicated that building 19.2 was no earlier in date than the very end of the 15th century and possibly dated to the 16th century, while the lazy beds could belong to any time after that. No further information was gathered from any of the other trenches to tie their date down any closer, and, of course, the ground might have been cultivated long after the island was abandoned as a residence. It is not implausible that these lazy beds were in use as late as the 19th century.

The evidence for reconstructing the group of features labelled 19.2 as a barrel-shaped house is admittedly tenuous, but not unreasonable, since it is a type recorded elsewhere at Finlaggan. The central hearth and quantities of sherds of pottery imply a domestic use. Structures 19.9 and 19.10 may either have represented the tenuous remains of other 16th-century houses or else have been part of the same building as 19.2, with low stone-faced turf walls incorporating timber uprights. Deposit 19009 could have been the remains of a replacement to an earlier floor represented by 19012.

There was no evidence to tie down the dates of structures 19.4 and 19.8. Each of these two groups of post-holes can be interpreted as the foundations for a ring of posts, either for supporting the roof of a larger roundhouse, or else providing the framework of a post and wattle exterior wall. The construction of circular shieling huts in the Highlands and Islands well into post-medieval times provides a clue that this tradition of circular building might not be totally unexpected in other contexts long after the prehistoric period, and we would tentatively suggest that they might date to some time in the centuries after the birth of Christ. Construction and occupation in Viking or early historic times equally cannot be discounted.

Structures 19.3 and 19.5 can be identified as the tenuous remains of early, probably prehistoric, roundhouses, and the hearth, structure 19.6, was clearly also of prehistoric date. The palimpsest of prehistoric to post-medieval structures actually sampled in trench 19 may be taken as an indication of how the whole island was at times covered with buildings.

Structure 19.7 cannot be securely dated, but compare the interpretation given below for a pit and hearth of medieval date in structure V.2, trench 7.



Illustration 8.36  
Trench 7, view from west in initial stages of excavation



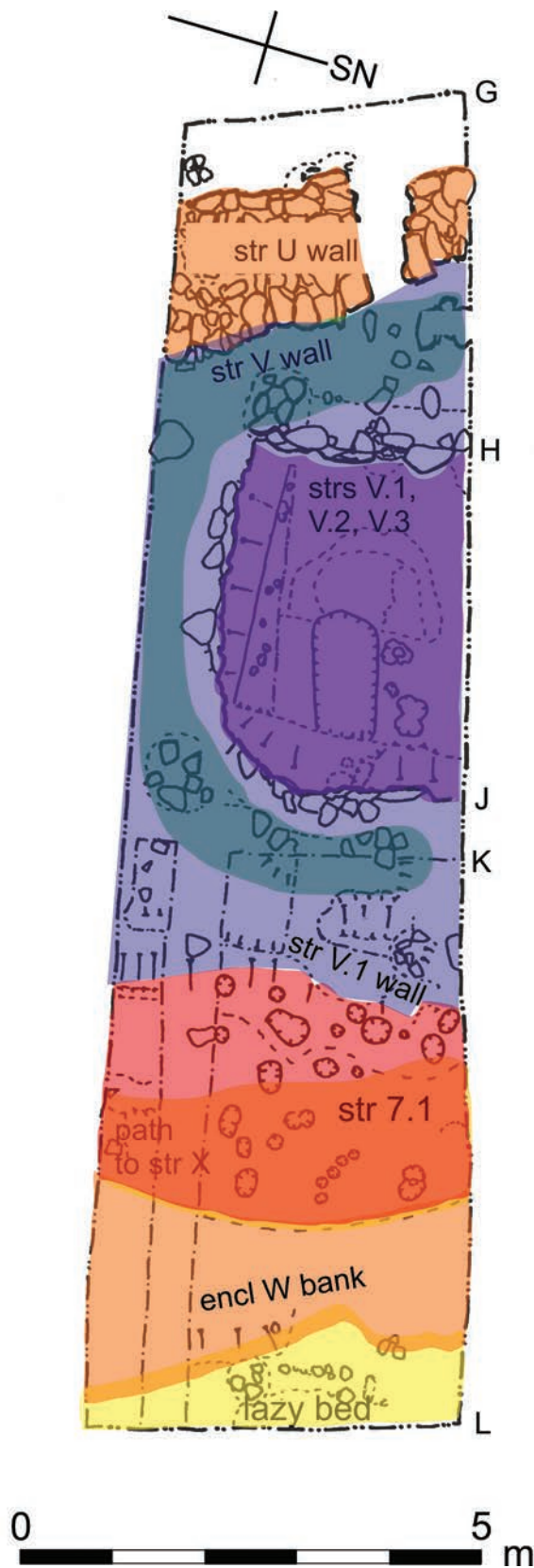


Illustration 8.37  
Trench 7, interpretation of main features

#### Trench 7 (Illus 8.21, 8.36–38, Table 8.6)

Trench 7 was excavated in 1992. It was approximately 4 by 15m, with its long axis running east–west through building V. This structure appeared of particular interest as the most substantial building within the ‘enclosure’ (the area of lazy beds bounded by a bank), apart from the chapel (Illus 6.9). Indeed, it was thought it might be the base of a tower-house. The excavation was designed to test what it was and its date. It was also hoped to provide answers on its stratigraphical or functional relationships to the adjacent building U, the lazy beds, enclosure W and the supposed timberwork fortifications around the north-east end of the island.

#### Agricultural activity and enclosure W (Illus 8.39, 8.40, 8.46)

Beneath the turf and topsoil of the trench, sloping down gently from building V to enclosure W, much of the area was covered with a deposit of dark brown silty peat [7007], about 10cm in

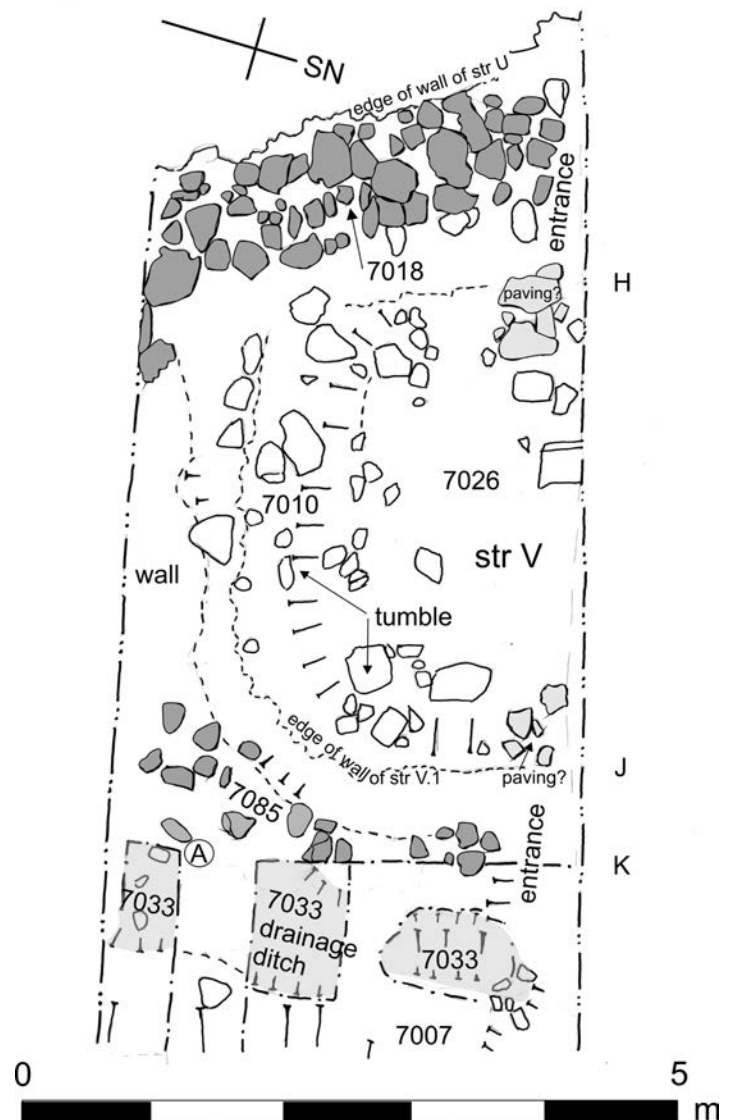


Illustration 8.38  
Trench 7, plan of building V

# EILEAN MÓR EXCAVATIONS IN THE AREA OF THE LAZY BEDS

Context	Description	Interpretation
7002	Stones, earth bonded	Revetment, str V.1
7003	Stones, earth bonded	Wall, str U
7004	Clayey silt, stones	Wall, str V.1
7005	Stones, earth bonded	Revetment, str V.1
7006	Clayey silt, stones	Wall, str V.1
7007	Peaty silt	Garden soil
7008	Stones, earth bonded	Revetment, str V.1
7009	Dark brown soil	Bank, str W
7010	Clayey silt, stones	Debris from str V walls
7011	Stones	Tumble
7014	Stones	Tumble
7015	Silty soil	Lazy bed, upper horizon
7016	Clay silt	Path to str X
7017	Gravel, clay silt	Garden soil
7018	Stones	Wall of str V
7019	Stones	Blocking in str U entrance
7020	Clay, charcoal flecks	Floor, str U
7022	Gravel, stones etc	Path to str X
7026	Humic soil	Build-up in ruin of str V
7027	Humic soil	Floor, str V.1
7028	Clay	Floor, str V.2
7029	Sandy silt	Debris from str V.1
7030	Sandy clay, ash etc	Floor, str 7.2
7031	Sand and stones	Natural
7033	Gravel	Fill of drainage ditch
7034	Silty sand	Wall of str V.1
7037	Cut	Post-hole, str 7.1
7038	Cut	Post-hole, str 7.1
7039	Peaty soil and silty sand	Laid turfs, wall of str 7.1
7041	Gravel, stones etc	Core of bank 7009
7042	Gritty clay silt	Debris from str V.1
7043	Sandy silt	Lazy bed, lower horizon
7044	Cut	Post-hole, str 7.1
7045	Cut	Post-hole, str 7.1
7046	Cut	Post-hole, str 7.1
7047	Cut	Post-hole, str 7.1
7048	Cut	Stake-hole, str 7.1
7049	Cut	Post-hole, str 7.1
7050	Cut	Stake-hole, str 7.1
7051	Cut	Post-hole, str 7.1
7052	Cut	Stake-hole, str 7.1
7054	Cut	Stake-hole, str 7.1
7057	Cut	Post-hole, str 7.1

Context	Description	Interpretation
7060	Cut	Post-hole, str 7.1
7062	Cut	Stake-hole, str 7.1
7064	Cut	Stake-hole, str 7.1
7066	Cut	Post-hole, str 7.1
7067	Cut	Stake-hole, str 7.1
7069	Cut	Stake-hole, str 7.1
7071	Cut	Stake-hole, str 7.1
7073	Cut	Stake-hole, str 7.1
7074	Cut	Stake-hole, str 7.1
7077	Cut	Post-hole, str 7.1
7078	Cut	Stake-hole, str 7.1
7080	Cut	Post-hole, str 7.1
7082	Cut	Stake-hole, str 7.1
7085	Stones	Wall of str V
7086	Cut	Pit, str V.2
7087	Stones	Tumble in str W
7088	Ashy silt	Fill of 7086
7089	Silty clay	Fill of 7090
7090	Cut	Post-hole, str V.2
7091	Organic silt	Fill of 7086
7093	Cut	Post-hole, str V.2
7094	Gravelly clay	Fill of 7086
7095	Clay silt	Fill of 7096
7096	Cut	Edge of str V.2
7097	Cut	Stake-hole, str V.1
7098	Silty gravel	Fill of 7099
7099	Cut	Wall or fence slot, str V.2
7100	Silty sand	Wall of str V.1
7101	Silty sand	Wall of str V.1
7106	Silt with clay and charcoal	Fill of 7107
7107	Cut	Post-hole, str V.2
7108	Cut	Post-hole, str V.2
7109	Silt with clay and charcoal	Fill of 7110
7110	Cut	Post-hole, str V.2
7111	Clay silt	Fill of 7110
7112	Clayey silt	Fill of 7113-15
7113	Cut	Stake-hole, str V.2
7114	Cut	Post-hole, str V.2
7115	Cut	Post-hole, str V.2
7116	Ash	Hearth, str V.2
7117	Sandy clay	Wall, str V.2
7118	Clay	Floor deposit, str V.2

Table 8.6  
Trench 7 contexts





Illustration 8.39

Trench 7 from east with stony tumble in the foreground collected in the furrow between lazy beds, then the spread bank of enclosure W, and beyond that the post- and stake-holes of structure 7.1

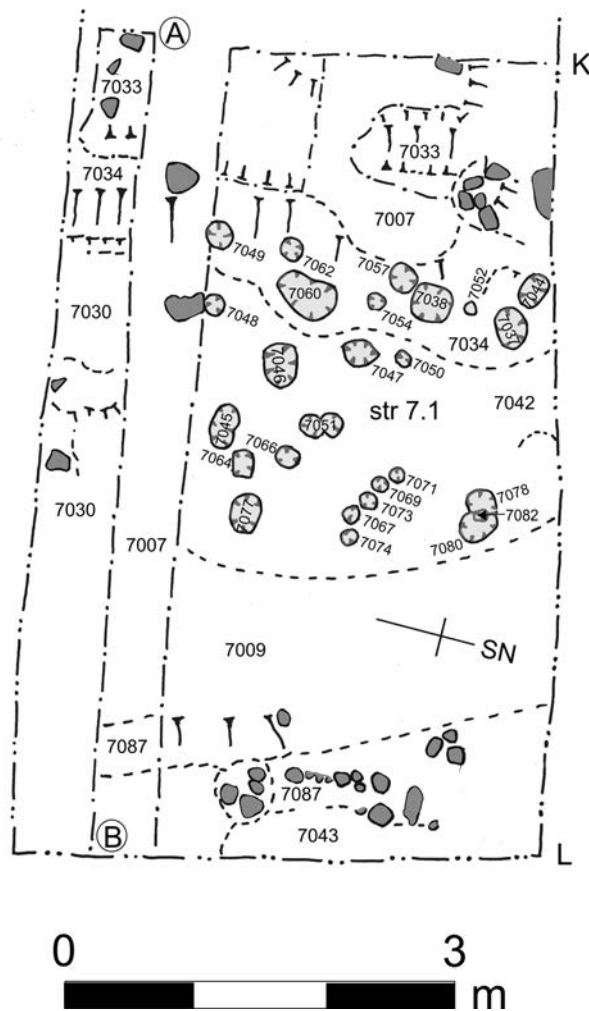


Illustration 8.40

Trench 7, plan of east end with structure 7.1 post- and stake-holes

depth, overlying a thin gravelly spread [7017]. The formation of 7017 is attributable to the action of earthworms within 7007. From these two contexts were recovered over 150 sherds of hand-made pottery, 2 sherds of reduced gritty and 1 of oxidised gritty ware, nails and rivets, stone counters or playing pieces and a brooch (C2) considered to be of 15th-century date. It is possible that 7007 and 7017 represent the spreading of midden material, or else soil grubbed up from deposits underneath in order to create a soil suitable for gardening. Evidence for the latter appears to be provided by the distribution of sherds of a vessel in a reduced gritty fabric, one of which (SF 7119) was recovered from 7007. Stratigraphically earlier is a sherd (SF 7158) recovered from the underlying earth core [7039] of the wall of house V.1, which can be dated to the 15th century.

From the RCAHMS plan of Eilean Mór and aerial photographs it was evident that the series of lazy beds examined in trench 19 extended into the area included in trench 7, particularly the small turf-banked enclosure (W) in the corner of the larger enclosure. The west bank of W [7009] was spread, flattened and incorporated in a lazy bed, appearing as a low, spreading mound of turfy material, at most 1.8m wide and only 0.25m in height, containing a core [7041] of more mixed occupation-derived material with small stones. A number of nails from topsoil, tumble and the path adjacent to structure W may have related to the construction of this bank (or house wall?). To the east our excavation clipped the edge of another lazy bed, sorted into two horizons, with a silty soil [7015] containing sherds of pottery etc overlying 7043, a more solid, dark brown, sandy silt – that is, an A and B horizon respectively. The furrow between 7009 and 7015 had collected some stone tumble [7087].

Immediately to the west of enclosure W the lazy bed which had deformed bank 7009 had also smothered a path, evident as a stony hollow [7016, 7022], created by a combination of slope-wash and trampling feet making their way to the shore and structure X.

#### *Structure V and post-holes 7.1 (Illus 6.9, 8.21, 8.36, 8.37)*

Before excavation, structure V appeared as an oval hollow partially bounded by low banks. It suggested a building about 11 by 8m overall, with its long axis approximately from south of south-east to north of north-west (but in the account that follows, for the sake of simplicity, described as if it were oriented north-south). Unlike many of the ruined structures on Eilean Mór, the banks did not appear to include a lot of stone. Trench 7 was positioned to take in the south half of the structure only.

Building V's surviving walling consisted of a low bank of earth and stone [7018, 7085] (Illus 8.38). The west segment was immediately adjacent to, and stratigraphically later than, the outer face of wall 7003 (structure U) with its blocked entrance. The north baulk of trench 7 passed through opposed entrances to building V, the west one with some crude paving. The interior space was hollowed or dished and was spread with earth [7010] which had washed from the encircling banks, and some tumble embedded in a layer of humic soil, up to 25cm thick, perhaps including collapsed roof material (turf) [7026]. There were no finds, and nothing to suggest human occupation.

Excavation on the east side of structure V also provided evidence of a ditch or gully, almost 1m wide and with a depth of

## EILEAN MÓR EXCAVATIONS IN THE AREA OF THE LAZY BEDS

about 33cm, filled with gravel [7033], marking the eavesdrip of building V. It was sealed by 7007. Beyond the ditch to the east, and also sealed by 7007 and 7017, were a number of truncated post- and stake-holes, none of which retained any signs of post-pipes (Illus 8.39, 8.40). There were few clues for phasing them or dividing them into groups. The closely set group of stake-holes, 7074, 7067, 7073, 7069 and 7071, might be explained as evidence for a wattle wall or fence. Post-holes 7077 and 7047 could be interpreted as the continuation of fence 19.1 identified in trench 19. Others might have belonged to a timberwork enclosure, running here below the higher ground occupied by the chapel and its burial ground, rather than round the perimeter of the island. For ease of reference they are grouped together as structure 7.1 although they may have varied considerably in date. From west to east they included:

7049	sub-rectangular
7062	circular, diameter 14cm, depth 10cm
7060	oval (recut?), 51 by 30cm, depth 13cm
7054	circular
7057	oval, 20 by 25cm, depth 26cm
7038	oval, 32 by 30cm, depth 12cm
7052	circular, diameter 20cm, depth 18cm
7044	sub-rectangular, 30 by 20cm, depth 14cm
7037	sub-circular, 30 by 22cm, depth 12cm
7048	circular, diameter 20cm, depth 20cm
7047	sub-rectangular, 30 by 20cm, depth 26cm
7046	sub-rectangular, 32 by 25cm, depth 20cm
7050	circular, diameter 17.5cm
7045	sub-rectangular, 30 by 20cm, depth 10cm
7051	circular (recut), 32 by 20cm, depth 12cm
7064	sub-rectangular, 26 by 18cm, depth 9cm
7066	circular, diameter 22cm, depth 12cm
7077	sub-circular, 30 by 20cm, depth 7cm
7071	circular, diameter 10cm, depth 7cm
7069	oval, 15 by 11cm, depth 10cm
7073	circular, 12cm, depth 12cm
7067	circular
7074	sub-circular, 19 by 15cm, depth 9cm
7078	circular, diameter 20cm, depth 13cm
7082	circular
7080	sub-circular, diameter 26cm, depth 12cm; recut of 7078

Table C5.4 in the Catalogue lists 66 nails, 17 rivets and a further 31 undifferentiated nails/rivets recovered from the overlying garden soil, lazy beds, etc, many of which may have originally been used in the structure of 7.1.

### Structure U (Illus 8.41, 8.42)

The west end of the trench took in the east wall [7003] of the house labelled as U by RCAHMS. Structure U, not necessarily all of one build, appears to have been long and rectangular, about 15 by 5m overall, with rounded ends. There was a cross-wall creating two rooms but no obvious signs of doorways. The excavated wall was up to 1.5m wide and 0.5m high, built of field stones with earth bonding. An entrance, only about 0.66m wide, provided access to the south room. It had been carefully blocked with



Illustration 8.41

Trench 7, entrance through wall 7003 in the foreground, with beyond the floor of building V.2 within the walls of house V.1

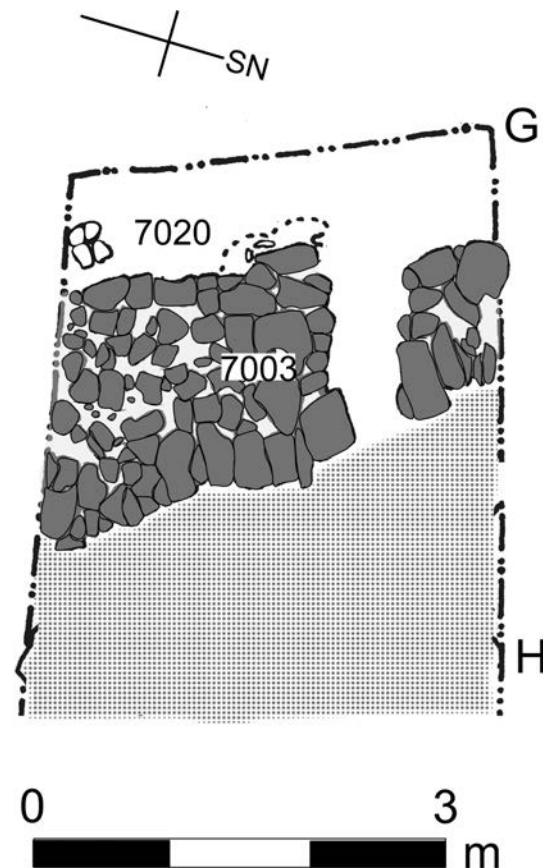


Illustration 8.42

Trench 7, plan of building U wall





Illustration 8.43

Trench 7, excavated remains of structures V.2 and V.3, bounded by the walls of house V.1

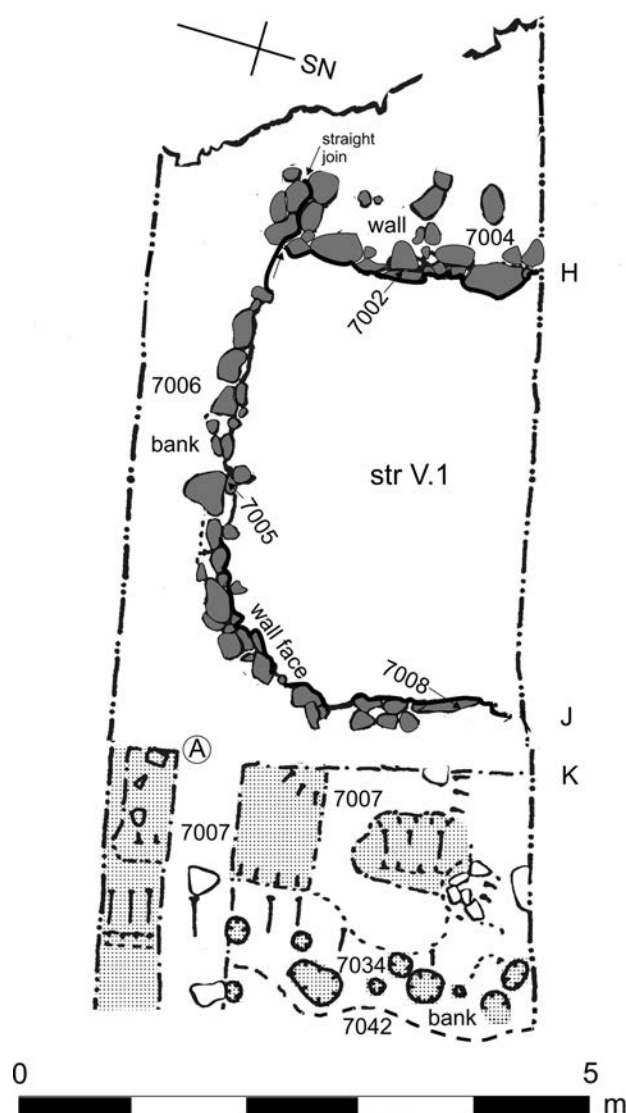


Illustration 8.44  
Trench 7, plan of house V.1

stones [7019]. In the interior was a floor surface [7020] composed of clay with charcoal flecks. The site notebook recorded quantities of 'white/grey slate (roof slate)' (fragments of type A roof slate) in association with wall 7003, but with so little excavated and knowledge of the reuse of these slates elsewhere on Eilean Mór it would be rash to assume that these were evidence for how the building was roofed. No other finds were recovered to offer a guide to dating.

#### Structure V.1 (Illus 8.43, 8.44)

It was evident that structure V sat on top of an earlier building (V.1), not necessarily with a similar footprint, probably with more than one room. The main elements that were excavated were the interior face of a south wall [7005], adjacent stretches of interior wall faces to east [7008] and west [7002], and associated occupation deposits [7027]. Its remains had been levelled to create a platform for the erection of house V.

The walls of house V.1 were of sandy clay [7004, 7006, 7034], perhaps largely derived from turf, faced in the interior with dry-stone walling standing to a maximum height of about 0.7m, in two to three courses. The stones were mostly local erratics and water-washed boulders. Several stones inside V.1, mixed with slumped bank material, had obviously fallen from this facing, but the number and size of these did not indicate that the facing had ever stood much higher. Perhaps these walls of earth and stone served as a plinth for a wooden superstructure of clapboard or weatherboard construction. The exterior of these walls was partially located in a narrow sondage along the south edge of the trench. There was no trace of an outside stone facing or evidence of one having been robbed. The overall width of the wall was about 2m.

The walls defined an irregularly shaped room, 3.6m across with a real south-west corner but a continuous curved wall where a south-east corner might have been expected. It is possible that the west wall was an internal wall of a building V.1 which extended further west. It appears to have been erected against the stone facing of the south wall.

Inside building V.1, under slope-wash [7010] and humic soil [7026], was a floor deposit [7027] up to 15cm deep of humic soil mixed with material collapsed or slumped from the walls and roof. Table C5.4 lists 5 nails, 5 rivets and 11 undifferentiated pieces of nail and rivet from 7027, which, along with others recovered from garden soil 7007 and 7017, may have served a structural function in the upper walls.

Also from 7027 were retrieved 18 sherds of pottery, including 6 of handmade vessels and a rim sherd of oxidised gritty ware (P54). The other 11 were sherds of reduced gritty ware. The metalwork included a copper alloy ring brooch (C3) and a type VI groat of James III (N34), minted c 1485. It showed no obvious signs of wear. Flotation of a sample of 7027 led to the recovery of fragments of charcoal and some wheat (*Triticum* sp) and oats (*Avena* sp).

To the east of the wall of house V.1 [bank 7034, 7039] a layer of gritty clay silt [7042] overlay a deposit of sandy silt [7029]. Both were observed in section, and most of the 7.1 post- and stake-holes were cut into the surface of 7042, which had probably been truncated and degraded by later agricultural activity represented by 7007 and 7017. The relationships of 7042 and 7029 with other

# EILEAN MÓR EXCAVATIONS IN THE AREA OF THE LAZY BEDS

structures in trench 7 were not fully established. It is probable that they related to the dilapidation and destruction of building V.1.

## Structures V.2 and V.3 (Illus 8.43, 8.45)

The removal of 7027 revealed that the stone wall facings of building V.1, to east and south, were bedded on a low bank [7117], possibly carved out of the natural rather than piled up using excavated material. It consisted of compacted, stony clay soil, oxidised red. The stones were mostly weathered quartzite, giving a sandy, gritty texture. Evidently 7117 represented the base for, or stubs of, an earlier structure, labelled V.2. If structure V.2 had clay walls they would probably not have been sturdy enough to support roof timbers. The solution would have been to support them on crucks. A post-hole to the east [7093], and another possible one to the west (unexcavated), may have been for supporting such timbers. Post-hole 7093 was D-shaped, its back edge to the wall, 22cm across. It narrowed to a pointed base with a depth of 30cm.

The floor of structure V.2 was a composite horizon of redeposited clay [7028]. Cut in it was a rectangular pit [7086], 1.45 by 0.75m, with a depth of 0.5m. Small slabs of decomposing schist alongside its north and south sides might have represented the remains of a stone lining. It was backfilled with a very ashy silt [7088] containing lenses of sandy clay, four nails, three rivets and a U-shaped staple, and also two sherds of pottery, one handmade containing organics and fire-blackened on its exterior, the other (SF 7323) oxidised gritty ware. Underneath it was a thin layer of gravelly clay [7094], and in the bottom of the pit a thin deposit of black organic silt [7091], from which came two nails, one still with some wood adhering to its shank.

Adjacent to the south edge of this pit was a thin patch of clay [7118] similar in character to 7117, and to the west was an area of burning [7116] or a hearth containing ash and charcoal. The association of the pit with a hearth suggested, as with structure 19.7, a type of cooking or other heating process in which the contents of a trough were kept on the boil with stones heated in a fire, although in neither case were any fire-cracked and reddened stones ('pot-boilers') recovered.

One post-hole [7090] to the south of pit 7086, a group of six to the north and a slot also may relate to structure V.2 or may be the truncated remnants of another structure dug away in the process of building structure V.1. Their main characteristics were as follows:

- 7090 circular, flat-bottomed, diameter 30cm, depth 14cm; fill [7089] of silty clay sealed by 7027
- 7107 circular, shallow scoop (truncated post-hole?), cut by 7108, diameter 27cm, depth 5cm; fill [7106] of silt with flecks of clay and charcoal sealed by 7027
- 7108 circular, shallow scoop (truncated post-hole?), diameter 40cm, depth 5cm; fill [7109] of silt with flecks of clay and charcoal sealed by 7027
- 7110 oval stake-hole narrowing to pointed bottom, diameter 11cm, depth 7cm; fill [7111] of silt with flecks of clay and charcoal sealed by 7027
- 7115 truncated, sub-rectangular post-hole with stone-packing, probably cut by 7114, 30 by 22cm, depth 6cm; fill [7112] of clayey silt sealed by 7027

- 7114 circular post-hole, cut by 7113, diameter 20cm, depth 8cm; fill [7112] of clayey silt sealed by 7027
- 7113 circular stake-hole with stone-packing, narrowing to pointed base, diameter 20cm, depth 8cm; fill [7112] of clayey silt sealed by 7027
- 7099 slot (for wattle fence?) with two possible stake-holes, cut across the clay bank [7117] beside the west wall of V.1, length 46cm, width 12–16cm and depth 14–17cm; fill [7098] of silty gravel sealed by 7027.

Structure V.3 was represented by a straight cut [7096], filled with clay silt [7095] and sealed by 7117. It ran approximately east to west, and had a length of at least 2.72m and a depth of up to 0.2m. At its east end another cut extending northwards was found to form a right angle, but the excavation of this was only pursued for a distance of a few centimetres. It appeared likely, however, that we had here the internal corner of an earlier house. Within the cut were a series of stake-holes, about 8–10cm in diameter, probably representing a wattle wall.

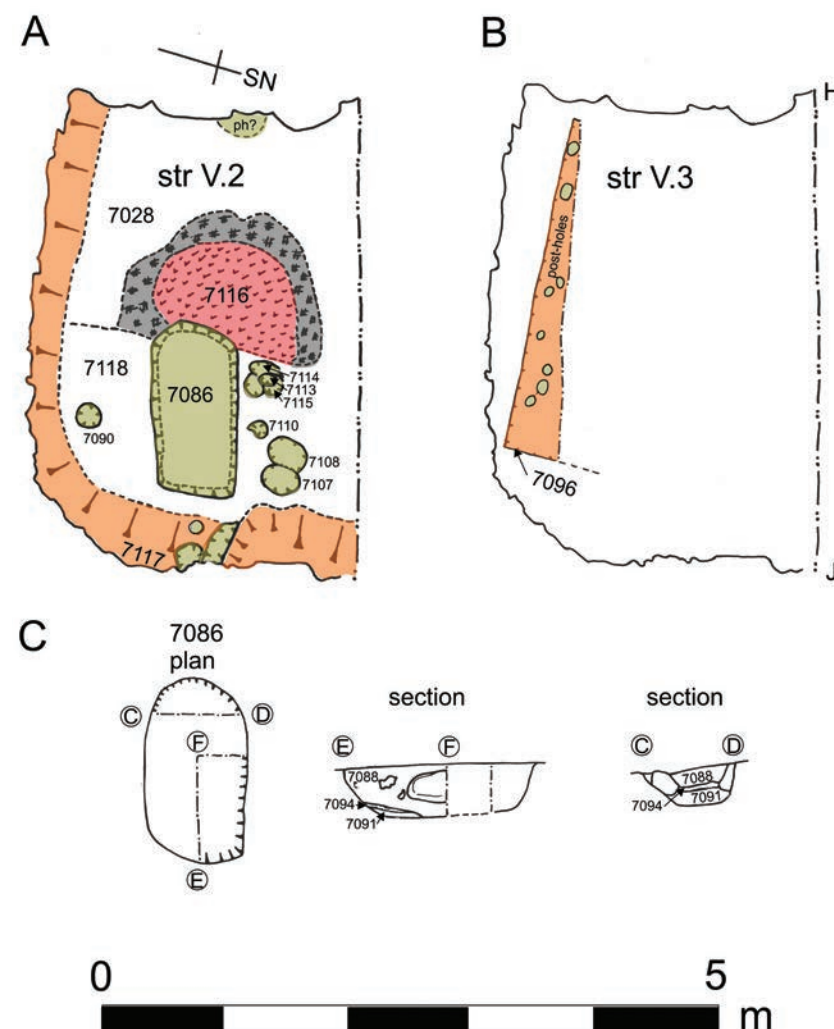


Illustration 8.45  
Trench 7: (A) plan of structure V.2; (B) plan of structure V.3; (C) plan and sections of pit 7086 in structure V.2



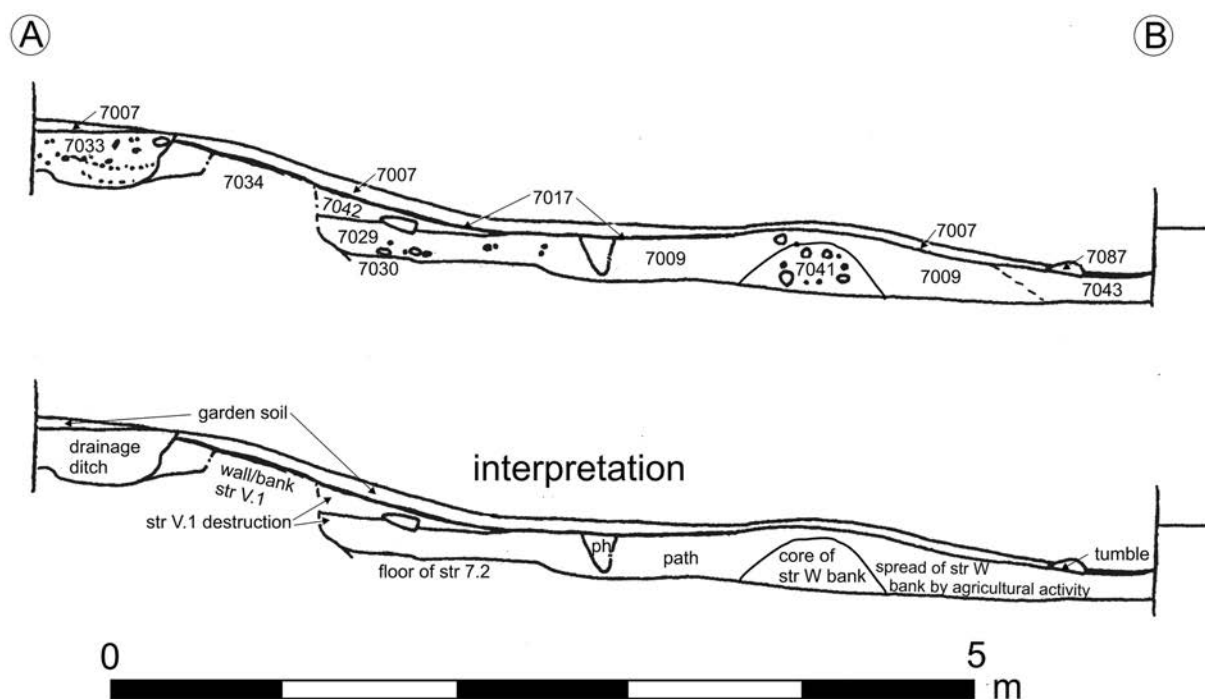


Illustration 8.46  
Trench 7, south-facing section A–B

#### Structure 7.2 (Illus 8.46)

In the sondage excavated along the south edge of the trench a sandy clay floor or surface [7030] with patches of burning – peat ash, charcoal and calcined bone – was partially exposed, extending to the east end of the trench. It lay on top of natural sand and stones [7031] from the surface of which were recovered small pieces of carbonised wood. Surface 7030 was at approximately the same level as the floor [7028] of V.2 and may well have belonged to a structure of similar date.

#### Interpretation (Illus 8.37)

Excavation in trench 7 provided another tantalising glimpse of earlier medieval activity and structures. Building V.2 with its pit and hearth can be dated on the basis of sherds of wheel-turned pottery to the 13th century. No dating evidence was recovered for structures 7.2 and V.3, which were at least as early, if not earlier.

Structure V.1 appears to have been a substantial later medieval house, probably with walls of timber construction founded on stone-faced earth and turf banks. The finds of pottery and a brooch from its occupation deposits suggested domestic use. The presence of oats was what might be expected, but wheat was not believed to have been grown locally and should be considered to have been an imported luxury. The James III groat from deposit 7027 would indicate that building V was destroyed or dismantled at the end of the 15th or the beginning of the 16th century.

Structure U could only be dated on the basis of its stratigraphical relationship with house V.1. It therefore was no earlier than about 1500. On the basis of our understanding of other structures and developments on Eilean Mór, a 16th-century date would seem likely. The area immediately to its east, previously occupied by building V.1, remained as an open area while building U was in use. At a later stage, perhaps still in the 16th century, house V was erected in this open area. Since its wall was built directly up against the wall of structure U, the door of which was then blocked, it can be supposed that structure U was then in ruins or no longer in use as a house. Building V probably served as a barn or store rather than a dwelling house. Its use may relate to the time and occupancy of Eilean Mór in post-medieval times that saw the creation of the lazy beds and other agricultural activity.

An assumption prior to undertaking work in trench 7, not tested by excavation, was that enclosure W was formed on its east and south sides from the bank of a palisade defending this end of the island. The short segment of the west bank of W exposed in the excavations had evidently been greatly damaged by later agricultural activity. If, on the one hand, it was an enclosure, as identified by RCAHMS, it might have been used as a garden or pen for animals. On the other hand, it might actually have represented the denuded remains of a house. At least some of the post-holes grouped as structure 7.1 might have belonged to a continuation of a defensive palisade around Eilean Mór, dating to sometime in the 16th century.