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The Archaeology of Finlaggan, Islay

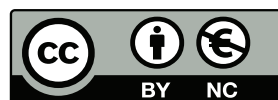
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ISBN: 978-1-908332-36-3 (hardback) • 978-1-908332-35-6 (PDF)

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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 7

LOCH-SIDE EXCAVATIONS

Trench 13 (site no. 44)

This excavation was planned in 1992 to probe a hut group (B) in site no. 44 at the head of Loch Finlaggan, on the land of Portanelan (Illus 4.5, 5.26 B). A start was made by laying out and de-turfing this trench, about 3m east–west by 8m north–south, positioned over the south wall of the westernmost hut. A limited amount of work in a small area of the trench indicates that the hut wall contained no stone but consisted of turf, burnt when the house was destroyed. The wall was put down straight on top of a thin layer of peaty soil overlying the quartzite bedrock. The work came to a halt before it progressed any further due to lack of resources. There were no finds.

Trench 20, Rudh' a' Chròcuin (site no. 38)

A settlement site (no. 38) on a terrace adjacent to the remains of a small jetty of boulders on the west shore of Loch Finlaggan (Illus 5.17, 7.1) consisted of the traces of two type A houses (A and B). A small trench (trench 20), about 1 by 6m, was positioned to cross structure B from side to side, avoiding the possible entrance in the south wall (Illus 7.2, 7.3; Table 7.1). A small trial pit, about 1 by 1.2m, was later partially excavated in one of the end walls.

The walls of this building had been constructed of turf, probably supported on a framework of wattles. The walls are now badly slumped and damaged by the formation of an iron pan and peaty soil. The remains of the walls [20001, 20008] of house B were of dark brown silty clay with peaty soil [20005, 20006] filling up the interior space and sloping down the outside. The east-facing section of the trench possibly showed a stake-hole in the inner face of the north wall. To level up the interior and make a firm floor, a thick layer of silty sand [20003, 20010] was laid down. A pit was evident in the west-facing section, capped with a layer of charcoal [20025]. This was interpreted as a hearth.

Structure B was built on top of the collapsed and weathered walls of an earlier house, structure B.1. The time between the demise of B.1 and the erection of B was sufficient for the formation of a covering of turf [20023, 20020, 20011], partially burnt, much of which was probably shovelled away in levelling the site for the new house. Hence the division between the freshly exposed south wall of B.1 and the debris from it [20009, 20019] and the new build of the wall of B [20008] laid on it is not distinct in section. There are clues that B.1 had a different footprint from

B. First, the west-facing section seemed to cut along the east wall [20004] of this structure. Second, its west wall may be reflected by the edge of a terrace 2m to the west of B, allowing for a turf-walled house with rounded corners, of similar size to house B.

There was a patch of charcoal and ash [20013] under the south wall of B.1, perhaps from the burning of the grass and heather prior to construction of the house. The area within the walls was cleared down to a surface of natural silty sand [20015]. A shallow scoop, extending from the east-facing baulk into the trench, had peat ash and burning [20014] spreading out from it, and was interpreted as a central hearth.

No dating evidence was found for either structure B or B.1. It is thought likely that they are, at earliest, of medieval date. If structure B can be identified as a residence of those who farmed Laichtcarlane, it is worth recalling that Laichtcarlane disappeared from rentals after 1686 (see Chapter 3).

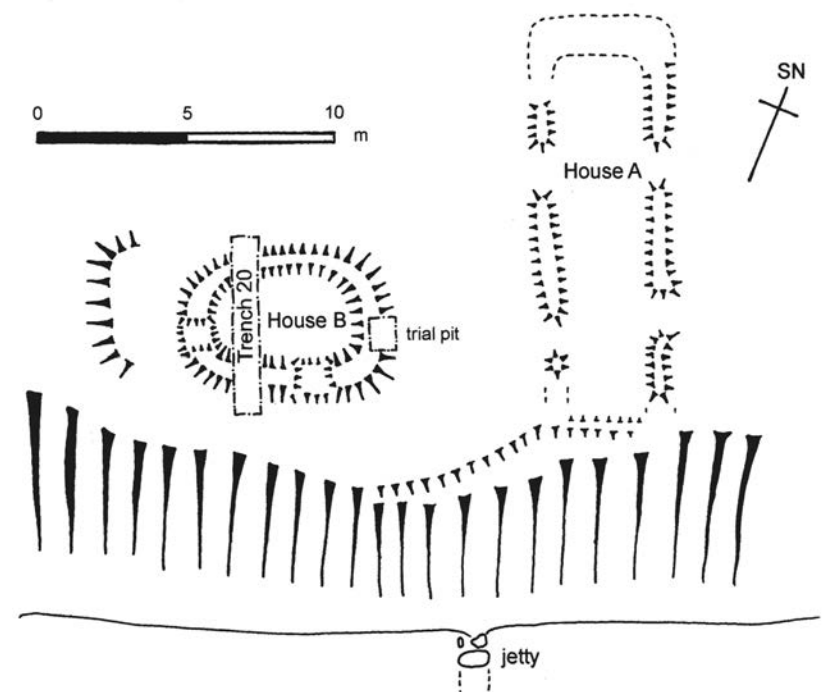


Illustration 7.1

Map of settlement at Rudh' a' Chròcuin, Portanellan (no. 38)

Trenches 21, 22, Cnoc Seannda (site no. 46)

There was never any doubt that the mound at Cnoc Seannda (Illus 5.29) consisted of solid rock, metamorphic limestone with the strata on edge. Some of these can be seen breaking the surface of the grass, tending in a south-west/north-east direction (true orientation). The mound attracted attention because it was considered a possible site of the inauguration ceremonies for the lords of the Isles. The idea that it was worthy of archaeological examination was presented to Channel 4's Time Team in 1994 and it undertook work over three days in June 1994, duly featured on the *Time Team* programme first aired in January 1995.

Initial survey of the mound by a team from the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England identified two adjacent low humps on the summit of the mound, running at right angles to the strike of the rock. The probability that at least one of these was the result of human intervention was reinforced by a resistivity survey carried out by Geophysical Surveys of Bradford

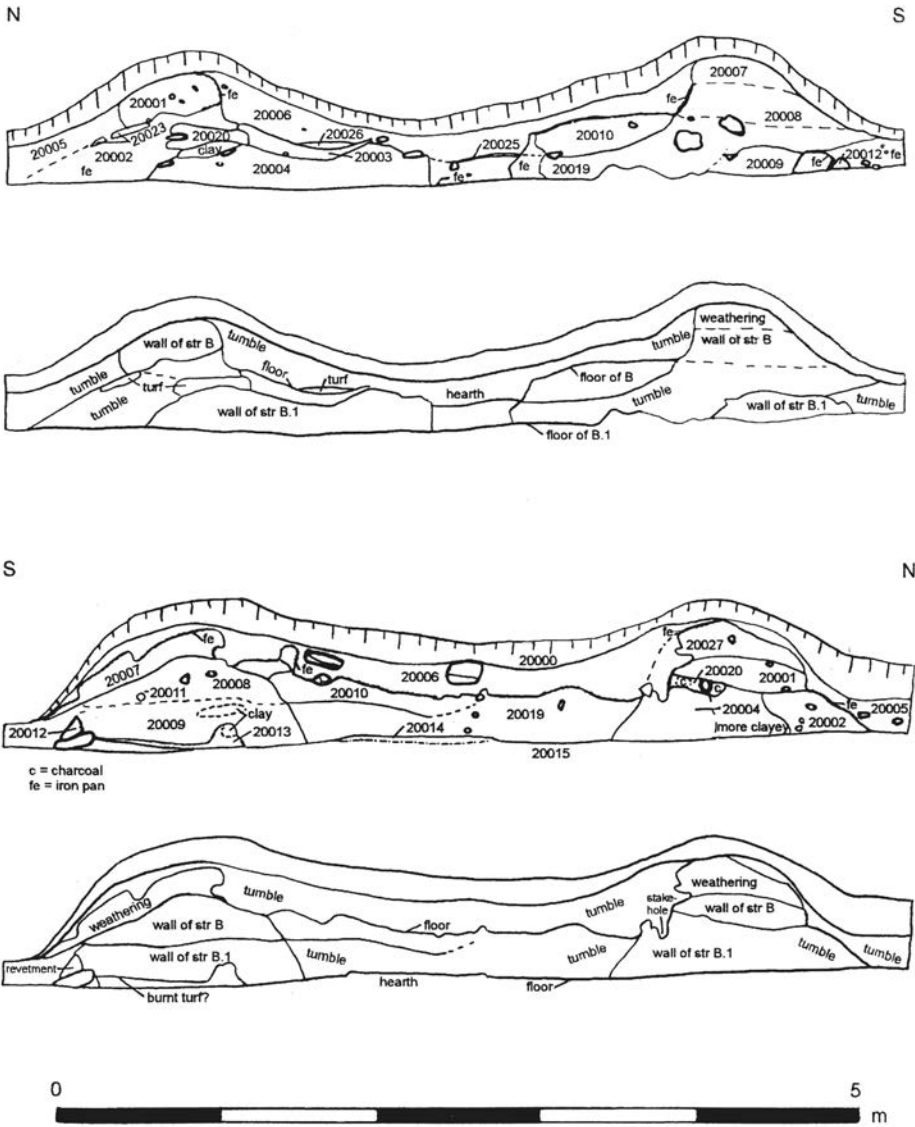


Illustration 7.2
Sections, trench 20, through house B at Rudh' a' Chròcuin: west facing with interpretation, and east facing with interpretation



Illustration 7.3
Trench 20, showing part of the east-facing section and the half-sectioned hearth [20014] of structure B.1

Context	Description	Interpretation
20000	Black silty clay	Topsoil
20001	Grey brown silty clay	Wall of str B
20002	Dark grey-brown clayey silt	Tumble from str B.1
20003	Dark brown silty sand	Floor make-up, str B
20004	Dark brown-black silty clay	Wall of str B.1
20005	Peaty soil	Tumble from str B
20006	Peaty soil	Tumble from str B
20007	Dark brown silty sand	Weathering, wall of str B
20008	Dark brown-black silty clay	Wall of str B
20009	Dark brown sandy silt	Wall of str B.1
20010	Dark brown silty sand	Floor make-up, str B
20011	Ash and charcoal	Burnt turf
20012	Stones	Revetment of wall of str B.1
20013	Ash and charcoal	Burnt turf under wall of str B.1
20014	Ash and charcoal	Hearth of str B.1
20015	Pale brown silty sand	Natural/floor of str B.1
20019	Dark grey-brown sandy silt	Tumble from str B.1
20020	Clay, charcoal, stones	Turf with burning
20023	Very dark brown clay	Turf
20025	Ash and charcoal	Hearth of str B
20026	Very dark brown clay	Turf
20027	Dark brown silty sand	Weathering, wall of str B

Table 7.1
Trench 20 contexts

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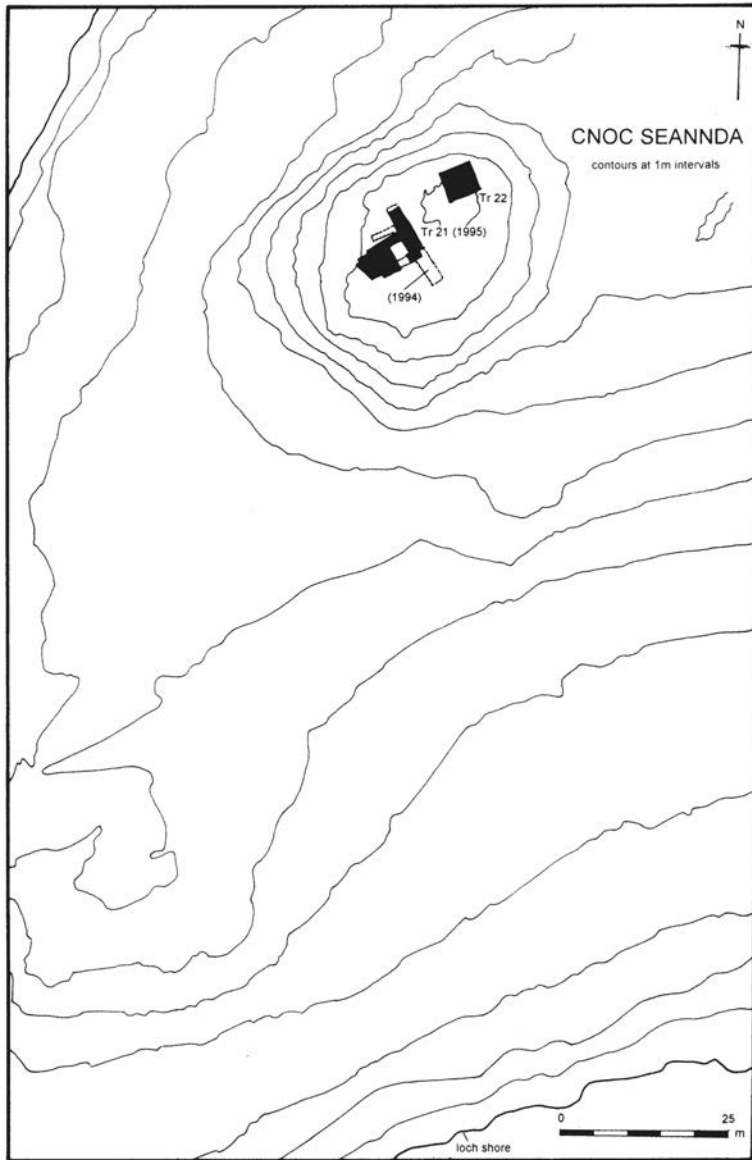


Illustration 7.4

Location plan of trenches 21 and 22 on the mound at Cnoc Seannnda

(Illus 5.28). It picked up two patches of high resistance on top of the mound, one of which turned out to be the 'chamber'. The other may reflect the underlying geology rather than the kerb cairn. There was also a suggestion from the English Royal Commission's work that there were traces of a low bank at the north-east edge of the summit area. Two trenches were opened to explore these features.

Trench 22 was 5 by 5m and positioned to the north-east of the summit area (Illus 7.4, 7.5). The removal of the turf and a very thin layer of topsoil revealed bedrock, the strata here twisting round and fortuitously giving the impression of a low bank. Trowelling of the topsoil produced a total of 14 flints.

Trench 21 developed in shape as a reversed F with its main axis lying approximately north-west/south-east. Here was revealed a stone-lined chamber excavated into the bedrock. Spread around were numerous flints, identified as of Mesolithic type, and a sondage into the deposits within the chamber led to the recovery of cattle bone. At this point it was decided to suspend excavation and to leave a more thorough examination of these features for 1995.

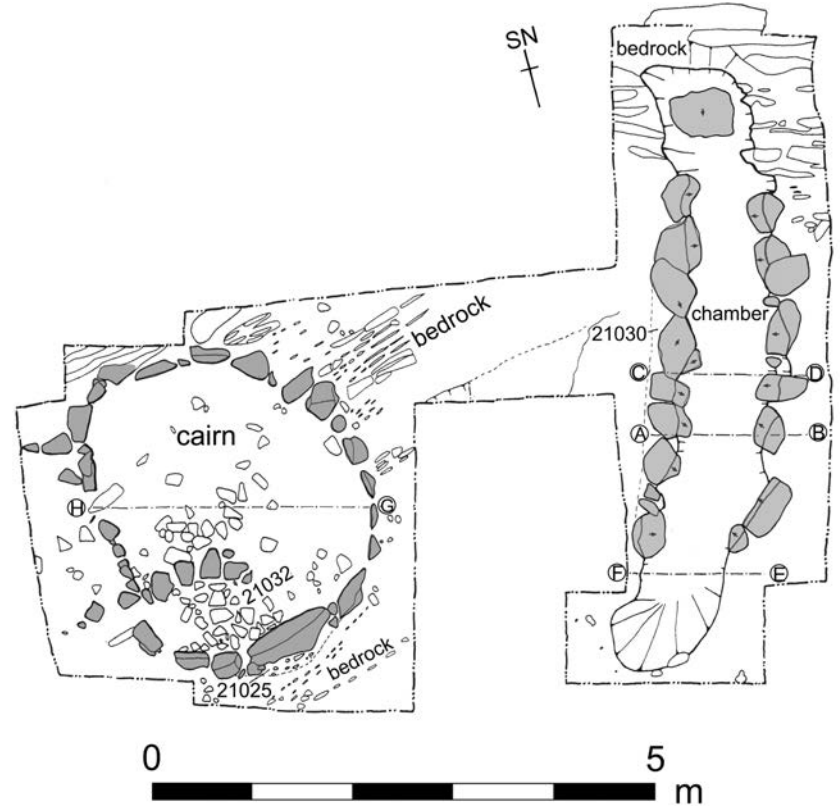


Illustration 7.5
Plan of trench 21 (1995)

In October 1995 the area of trench 21 containing the chamber was reopened and the trench extended to take in the adjacent hump identified in the survey of the mound. This proved to represent the remains of a small kerb cairn (Illus 7.5, 7.11; Table 7.2).

The natural stratigraphy on the top of the mound consisted of a relatively thin deposit of topsoil and turf overlying the limestone bedrock. Over much of the area excavated in trench 21 there was a gravel spread [21014, 21007] sandwiched between the topsoil and bedrock. It contained flints and was possibly the main source of the several hundred flints recovered from various deposits within the trench and identified as Mesolithic (see Karen Hardy's report in Chapter C1 of the Catalogue). The possibility was considered that this gravel spread might be a Mesolithic deposit in situ, but it was stratigraphically later than the chamber and may rather be interpreted as material robbed from the cairn and spread around.

The cut for the chamber turned out to be banana-shaped, about 6m long and 1m deep (Illus 7.6, 7.7). The actual chamber itself was only about 4m long, 1.5m wide at the top and narrowing towards the bottom, and it was not obviously curved. It was lined on both sides by large boulders and slabs, some of them pieces of limestone prized from the bedrock, some of them with smaller boulders on top to level up the sides. The two ends of the cut contained sandy silt and fragments of limestone [21018, 21037], representing the original backfill from when the chamber was built. Overlying this deposit in the north end was a large slab of limestone that may be the dislodged end piece of the chamber (Illus 7.8). There was no similar slab in the corresponding position at the south end of the chamber. The bottom of the chamber, and the gaps between the boulders and slabs, had a deposit [21028, 21030] of silty clay with flakes of limestone, interpreted as silting.

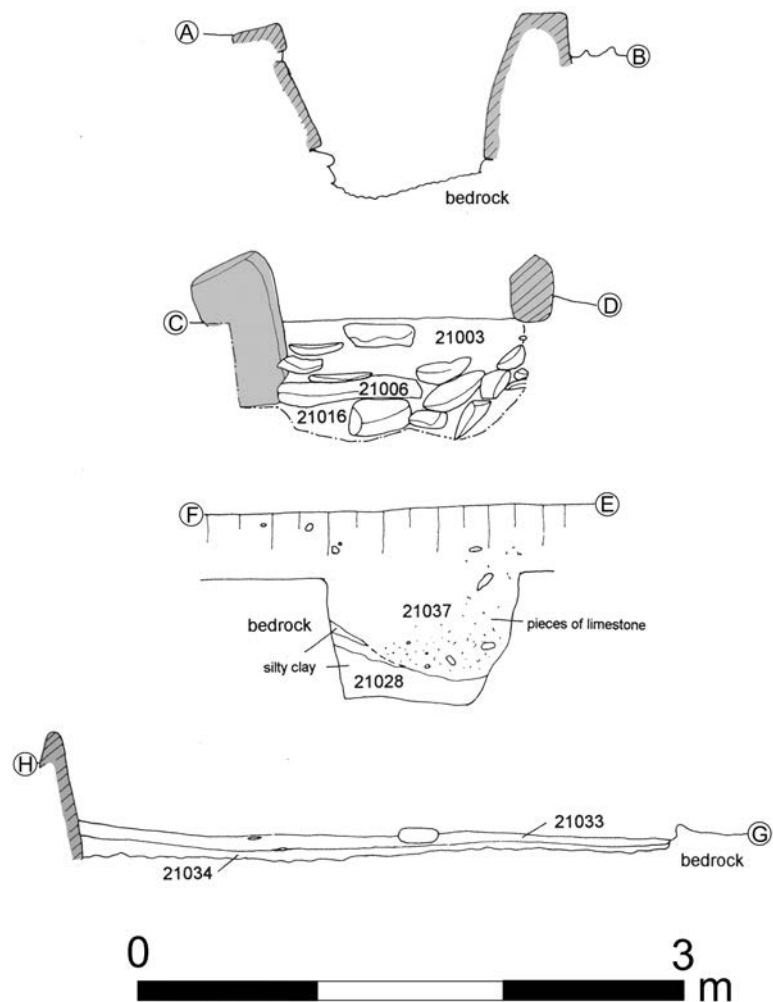


Illustration 7.6
Sections, trench 21 (1995)



Illustration 7.7
Trench 21, the chamber, fully excavated



Illustration 7.8
Trench 21, showing large slab of limestone that may be the dislodged end piece of the chamber

Context	Description	Interpretation
21003	Clayey silt	Top fill of chamber
21006	Rubble	Fill of chamber
21007	Sandy silt with gravel	Imported gravel
21014	Sandy silt with gravel	Imported gravel
21016	Clayey silt	Fill of chamber
21018	Sandy silt, pieces of limestone	Backfill in cut for chamber
21023	Clayey silt with gravel	Cairn material
21025	Small stones, clayey silt	Backfill in cut for kerb of cairn
21028	Silty clay, limestone flakes	Silting
21030	Silty clay, limestone flakes	Silting
21032	Rubble	Cairn material
21033	Silty clay	Levelling within cairn
21034	Clay, limestone fragments	Levelling within cairn
21035	Clay	Levelling within cairn
21037	Sandy silt, pieces of limestone	Backfill in cut for chamber

Table 7.2
Trench 21 contexts

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Illustration 7.10
Flint barbed and tanged arrowhead (SF 21157)
found in the chamber on Cnoc Seannda



Illustration 7.11
Trench 21, the kerb cairn

Under a build-up of peaty soil [21003] the chamber contained deposits of rubble and clayey silt [21006, 21016], perhaps material backfilled in antiquity when the structure was reopened and robbed. The rubble included slabby pieces of limestone and quartzite, but none were big enough to be convincingly interpreted as the remains of lintel stones for the chamber. There were also several fragments of animal bone in 21003, including five identified pieces of cattle and one of red deer (Table C9.15r in the Catalogue).

From the clayey silt fill in the bottom of the chamber [21016] was recovered a pierced bone disc (Illus 7.9), identified as an Iron Age whirligig, possibly a toy, and also a flint barbed and tanged arrowhead of chalcolithic or Bronze Age type (Illus 7.10). It was found at the bottom of 21016 in the north-west corner of the chamber. Whereas the whirligig might provide a clue for when the chamber was robbed of its original contents, the arrowhead might be all that remained of the latter.

The small denuded kerb cairn had no sure stratigraphic relationship to the chamber. It is D-shaped, about 3.5 by 2.8m (Illus 7.5, 7.6, 7.11). The kerbstones were graded in size and height, with the largest on the southern segment, and the bedrock was cut back to take them. Within the kerb the surface was levelled up with clay [21033, 21034, 21035]. A spread of stones [21032], particularly in the south-west segment of the cairn, represented all that remained in situ of the cairn superstructure, sealed by a layer of clayey silt with gravel [21023]. Within 21032, there was an alignment of boulders running east-west, perhaps the remains of a burial chamber. It was clear, however, that the cairn had been robbed. Small pieces of calcined bone and charcoal were recovered from the gravelly material [21023] and from the make-up deposits.



Illustration 7.9
Bone whirligig (?) (SF 21154) found in the chamber on Cnoc Seannda

