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# The Archaeology of Finlaggan, Islay

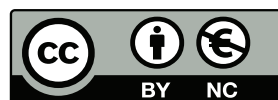
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# PART III

## THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS

As elsewhere in this report, unless otherwise stated, orientations and heights above sea level are based on the site grid, the layout of which is described in the section on archaeological survey in Chapter 1. Site north (SN) is approximately in the direction of north-west. In the text, for ease of description, walls and other features are usually described as if they conform to the nearest cardinal points,

north, south, east and west. Trench plans have corners and other salient points labelled with capital letters to facilitate matching features from one plan to another. The location of drawn sections is indicated by the use of capital letters contained in circles. Blocks of dot matrix are used on some trench plans to show areas that are of no relevance or a different date to the focus of the plan.

## Chapter 6

# THE LOCH-SIDE, EILEAN MÓR AND EILEAN NA COMHAIRLE

### The loch-side

By 'the loch-side' we mean only the top end of Loch Finlaggan, adjacent to Eilean Mór. It was from here that access to that island must normally have been made and, as can be seen from our distribution map (Illus 4.1), there is a considerable density of sites and monuments here, many of which were expected to have some meaningful relationship to historic Finlaggan.

For much of its length there is a narrow rocky shore from which a steep slope rises to a low terrace. At the mouth of the Finlaggan River the ground is marshy. Much of the land now overlooking the shore is poor quality and peaty, but to the east of the river and around the top of the loch the soil is of much better quality and has evidently been ploughed in relatively recent times, perhaps removing many earlier traces of human activity.

The mound at Cnoc Seannnda, adjacent to the Finlaggan Visitor Centre, is a prominent landmark. Between it and the loch-side there is a level area of ground, some 80m square.

### Eilean Mór

In shape and outline Eilean Mór approximates to the segment of an orange (Illus 6.1). It is about 180m long by 75m in maximum width, rising to over 3m above the level of the loch. Its total area is 7,100m<sup>2</sup> including the marsh, or alluvial tail, at its north (site east) end.

Eilean Mór is formed from thin beds of Dalradian limestone, as narrow as 15cm at the south-west tip of the island, where, as along the south shore, they can be seen to be interbedded with grey to



Illustration 6.2

The west shore of Eilean Mór in spring 1988 with beds of limestone and phyllite exposed as a result of erosion

grey-blue phyllites that contain cubes of iron pyrites (Illus 6.2). These phyllites appear to be highly cleaved, while the more massive limestone exhibits tension cracks filled with calcite. The cliff face to the south-east of the chapel represents the largest exposure of phyllite on the island. The dip of these flaggy limestones and shales is almost vertical and the beds are often very contorted.

### *The alluvial tail (Finlaggan Marsh)*

*(Based on work by Michael Cressey)*

The shape and size of Eilean Mór may have changed significantly over time through human occupation and the build-up of marsh deposits. The eastward-pointing tail of the island consists of alluvium and represents the fine material reworked from the beach gravels that skirt part of the island. The prevailing south-west (site west) winds in winter form waves powerful enough to wash the finer particles out of the beaches and deposit them in the lee of the island. It is possible that the south-west (site west) tip and south (site south-west) shore of the island have suffered considerable erosion from wind and waves since it was first occupied by humans (Illus 6.2). Considerable quantities of sediment are also continuously washed into the loch by the Finlaggan River and have also contributed to the formation of the alluvial tail – ‘the Finlaggan Marsh’ – that is now a significant part of the land mass of the island. It is described in considerable detail by Dr Cressey in his PhD thesis (1995: 139–64). Here we may note the following observations and conclusions that he drew, based on geochemical analyses of a series of cores and pollen analysis.

Dr Cressey was able to trace the effects of relatively recent events in the geochemical record, like the 1982 afforestation adjacent to Eilean Mór, and a mid-19th-century rise in atmospheric pollution as a result of industrialisation. Two earlier events are of particular significance for the archaeology of Finlaggan. The first is a rise about 1586 in traces of lead, zinc, copper, calcium and manganese. Dr Cressey identifies this as a possible chemical response to local lead mining activity. The second relates to a thin band of yellow-brown sand with no organic remains and a decrease in all metals. It has a sharp boundary with the underlying woody peat. Dr Cressey identifies this as a major flood event about 1531. The onset of the formation of the Finlaggan Marsh may have been about AD 1200.

The palynological record allowed Dr Cressey to reconstruct the landscape around Eilean Mór about 1200 to 1000 BP as predominantly tundra-like, with grasses and *Empetrum* (crowberry) alongside stands of mixed pine and birch woodland on the more acidic soils. Sometime after, hazel colonised the more fertile limestone areas, especially around the margins of the island. Some of the trees reached maturity before being inundated by rising loch levels, possibly due to a deteriorating climate and decreasing woodland cover.

### *Bathymetric survey*

The south (site south-west) and south-east (site south) shores of Eilean Mór are made up of cobbles and boulders, with finer gravel and sand occurring in patches close to the shore near the south-west (site west) tip. The gravel beds appear to have been used as

spawning beds by fish. Most of the gravel consists of limestone and phyllite, with the pebbles exhibiting a more rectangular shape when compared with the gravel derived from the Port Askaig tillite and quartzite that form the beach on the opposite side of the tip of the island. Further east, the sheltered north shore is made up of sands and silts.

A bathymetric survey of the loch around Eilean Mór carried out by the British Geological Survey in 1990 (Technical Report WB/90/32: copy in Finlaggan Site Archive) demonstrated that the water adjacent to the island does not reach a great depth. Between the island and the adjacent shores of the loch it is for the most part less than 1.53m (5ft) deep. To the south of the island is a gentle slope from the foreshore to a break of slope at a depth of 2.43m (8ft), which is generally covered with cobbles and small boulders up to 60cm in size. Beyond, to the south-west, the loch attains a depth of 13.41m (44ft).

### *Soil formation and type*

Eilean Mór is part of map unit 165 on the Soil Survey of Scotland's Soil Map of Islay. It is described as a brown forest soil of the Deecastle Association. Illus 6.3 shows the west-facing section of a sondage excavated in 1994 in the north-east corner of trench 19, in an area formerly given over to lazy beds (compare the archaeological section drawing, Illus 8.27). In terms of soil science this is a podsol with three main horizons, from top to bottom: A, B and C. The archaeological information on contexts is added to the following descriptions:

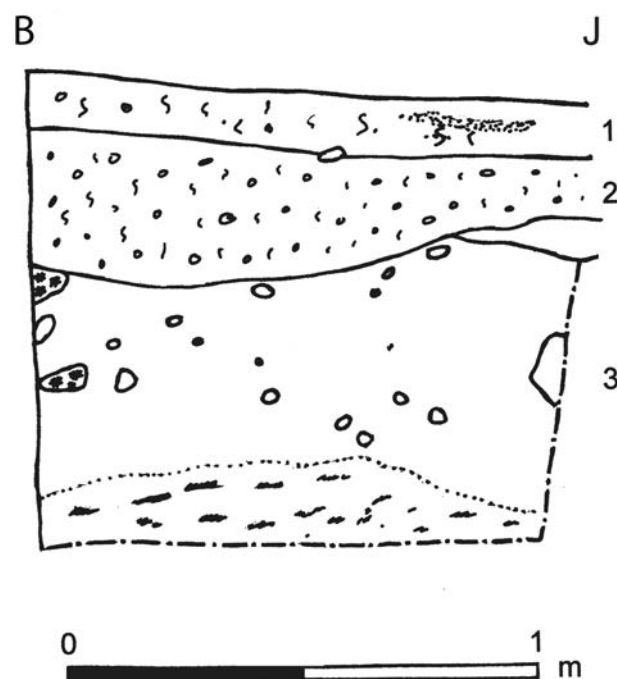


Illustration 6.3

West-facing section in a sondage in the north-east corner of trench 19: (1) silty loam; (2) B horizon; (3) C horizon. The locations of points B and J are shown on Illus 8.26

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1. A horizon, dark brown silty loam, Munsell colour 7.5YR 3/2; roots abundant, fairly stone free but a band of small pebbles <2cm in places due to sorting below the roots. In archaeological terms this has been subdivided into two layers, the upper [19001] being turf and topsoil, the lower [19140] representing a lazy bed.
2. B horizon, a compact, very dark grey clay (10YR 3/1), over 70% small angular stones. This is 19146, separated from the overlying lazy bed by a stone line [19003], representing the activity of earthworms.
3. C horizon, dark yellowish-brown (10YR 4/6) in colour, containing patches of red (2.5YR 4/8) mottled soil. Generally, the soil matrix has a sandy, gritty texture. Several large stones are present, as much as 17cm across. The composition is uniform throughout the profile. Towards the base there is a zone of dark brown-black (10YR 2/5) mottled, concreted manganese stones.

For a similar sequence excavated in a sondage under a lazy bed in trench 3, see Illus 8.16.

This information on soil formation and type was augmented by a series of nine cores taken north–south across this area of lazy beds at 5m intervals in 1992, using an augur with a 20cm bit. The soil profiles all approximated to that just described from trench 19. There was no evidence in this area for redeposited soil or deliberate dumping to make or extend the island. Instead, the material appears to be predominantly of glacial derivation. The reduced grey – gleyed – B horizons suggest a fluctuating water table. This reduction, on ground which was apparently prone to saturation, was so intense as to create yellow, grey or blue bands, encountered in several places in our excavations. Phosphate analyses indicate a high level (above 50%) of nutrient input, presumably due to manuring.

### Gravel horizons

Gravel horizons (stone lines) were observed in most trenches on Eilean Mór. This size sorting of particles in topsoil is a widespread phenomenon, generally attributed to the behaviour of earthworms. They create burrows in the topsoil by ingesting soil and excreting it to the surface. Worms can only pass particles of 2mm or less through their guts. Over a period of many years their behaviour results in the formation of stone-free topsoils with a distinctly stony layer at their base as particles larger than 2mm accumulate beneath the finer material excreted by the worms. These gravel horizons mark the lowest limit of earthworm activity and are often formed over more compact material that the worms were unable to penetrate.

At Finlaggan it is supposed that much of the gravel incorporated in these stone lines had been imported to the island for use in building activities, especially the manufacture of mortar, with or without a significant admixture of lime. The gravel could mostly have been dug up around the edges of the loch and evidently contained many prehistoric flints – hence the prevalence of these in medieval contexts in the excavations. Apart from the flints, gravel horizons have also been the source for several small artefacts, including coins, metal fittings and sherds of pottery. In using these artefacts as potential dating evidence it has to be understood that the formation of the horizons may have taken place over a long period of time.

### Flora and fauna

The island and its ruins are generally covered by grass, and there are reed beds (*Phragmites australis*) along the north (site north–east) shore and in the channel separating the tip from the loch shore. Here also in summer water lilies grow. Table 6.1 lists the plants growing on the island, as noted on a single visit in August 1998 by Carol and Malcolm Ogilvie. The classification and nomenclature of Stace (1997) is used. Further visits spread through the flowering season would probably have greatly increased the number of species identified.

Common name	Latin name	Gaelic name
Cleavers	<i>Galium aparine</i>	Garbh lus
Common club-rush	<i>Scirpus lacustris</i>	Cruach luachair
Common knapweed	<i>Centaurea nigra</i>	Cnapan dubh
Common nettle	<i>Urtica dioica</i>	Faenntag
Common ragwort	<i>Senecio jacobaea</i>	Buadhlan buidhe
Common sorrel	<i>Rumex acetosella</i>	Samh
Common valerian	<i>Valeriana officinalis</i>	Carthen arraigh
Compact rush	<i>Juncus conglomeratus</i>	Cuilc chrann
Creeping buttercup	<i>Ranunculus repens</i>	Buigheag
Creeping thistle	<i>Cirsium arvense</i>	Aigheannach
Curled pondweed	<i>Potamogeton crispus</i>	Luachair bhog
Docks spp	<i>Rumex spp</i>	Copag copagach
Floating bur-reed	<i>Sparganium angustifolium</i>	
Hemlock water-dropwort	<i>Oenanthe crocata</i>	Fealla bog
Hogweed	<i>Heracleum sphondylium</i>	Finell sraide
Jointed rush	<i>Juncus articulatus</i>	Bodan aoin
Lady's bedstraw	<i>Galium verum</i>	Ruin
Marsh cinquefoil	<i>Potentilla palustris</i>	Cuig bhileach
Marsh woundwort	<i>Stachys palustris</i>	Lus nan sgor
Marsh-marigold	<i>Caltha palustris</i>	Chorrach shod
Meadow vetchling	<i>Lathyrus pratensis</i>	Peasair bhudhe
Meadowsweet	<i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>	Chu chulainn
Purple-loosestrife	<i>Lythrum salicaria</i>	Lusna sith chainnt
Ragged-robin	<i>Lynchnis flos-cuculi</i>	Plur na cubhaig
Reed canary-grass	<i>Phalaris arundinacea</i>	
Sharp-flowered rush	<i>Juncus acutiflorus</i>	
Smooth hawk's-beard	<i>Crepis capillaris</i>	Cluasluich
Soft-rush	<i>Juncus effusus</i>	
Tormentil	<i>Potentilla erecta</i>	Learnhach
Tufted hair-grass	<i>Deschampsia cespitosa</i>	Ciob
Water avens	<i>Geum rivale</i>	Machall coille
White water-lily	<i>Nymphaea alba</i>	Duilleag bhaite bhan
Wild angelica	<i>Angelica sylvestris</i>	Lus nam buadha
Yellow-rattle	<i>Rhinanthus minor</i>	Modhalan bhudhe

Table 6.1  
Flora of Eilean Mór, based on survey made in August 1989 by Carol and Malcolm Ogilvie



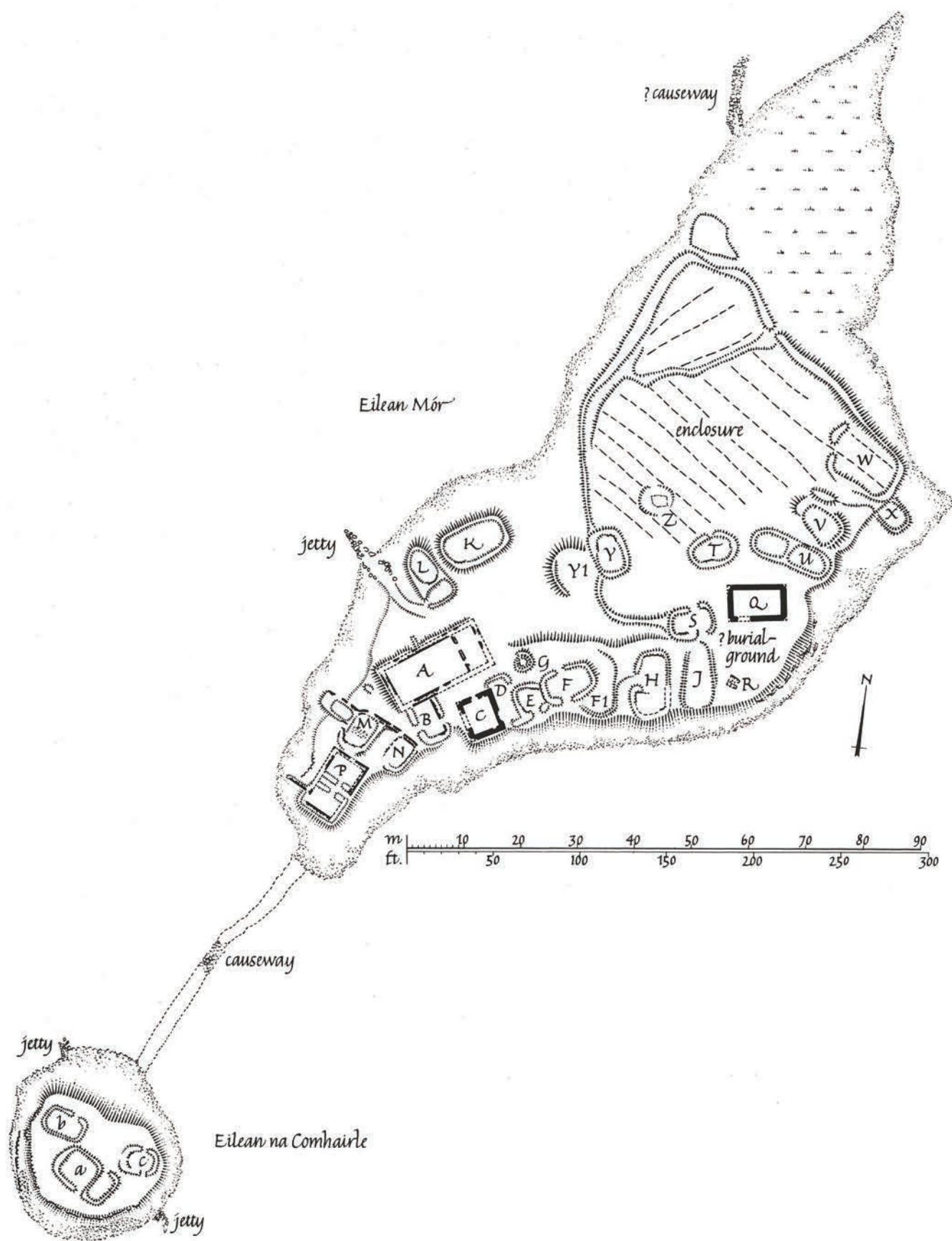


Illustration 6.4  
Map of Eilean Mór and Eilean na Comhairle by RCAHMS. Orientation is true north (© Crown Copyright: HES)

## THE LOCH-SIDE, EILEAN MÓR AND EILEAN NA COMHAIRLE

Rats, toads and frogs have been observed on Eilean Mór but there are no traces of rabbits, moles or other burrowing mammals. No sheep, cattle or horses have been allowed to graze the island in recent memory.

### *Description of the remains*

Much of the island is covered with the ruins of structures (Illus 6.4, 6.5). Prior to excavation it was thought that they represented a mix of medieval and later houses, many of drystone construction. Written sources did not provide any clear evidence for when occupation of the island ceased. Here we provide an overview of the artificial structures on the island. More detailed information on many of them is contained in the description of the excavations.

The island is now approached by a wooden walkway along the edge of the Finlaggan River and a bridge that crosses the shallow water, no more than a few metres wide, separating the tip of

the alluvial tail from the loch shore. When the historian Isabel Grant visited in the early 1930s she formed the impression, no doubt aware of the similar views of an earlier antiquary (MacLagan 1898: 38), that Eilean Mór had been turned into an island by the cutting of a 'wide, muddy ditch' across the 'partly artificial causeway' or neck of the peninsula extending into the loch (Grant 1935: 403). It is not an improbable suggestion that as this end of the loch silted up, Eilean Mór's status as an island was enhanced in such a way, perhaps in an attempt by the landowner or tenant to preserve its natural beauty and significance. The 1st edition Ordnance Survey map clearly shows the stretch of water between the tip of the island and the loch-side, more or less as it is now, and an earlier 19th-century visitor, the botanist Balfour (1845: 23), left a vivid account of how he had to wade through water four feet deep 'at the place where the island can be reached'. If a channel was artificially cut it must have been prior to Balfour's visit in 1844. There is, of course, no reason to doubt Eilean Mór's integrity as a real island in medieval times.

From the tip of the alluvial tail another wooden walkway crosses the marsh to the firmer ground of the island proper, separated by a turf-covered bank, actually the remains of a post-medieval fortification (Illus 6.6). Just outside the turf bank, where it bends from the north-west shore of the island across the base of the alluvial tail, is a low mound which excavation shows is the stub of a gate-tower (Illus 6.7). An earlier means of access is indicated by the remains of a stone causeway visible in the water off the north edge of the alluvial tail. From the end of the wooden walkway a modern path crosses an undulating area of old lazy beds before bifurcating, the left fork climbing to the chapel on the highest part of the island, the right extending down the length of the island to the tip opposite Eilean na Comhairle.

The lazy beds are contained within a triangular enclosure formed by the turf bank on two sides, but only partially on the third where its two ends disappear, one under house S, the other



Illustration 6.5

Map of Eilean Mór with contours (excluding upstanding human remains) at half-metre intervals. The water level is as at November 1989. The value of the contour lines is relative to the temporary site benchmark



Illustration 6.6

The bank defining the edge of Eilean Mór proper. To the left is the alluvial tail; to the right lazy beds and the chapel



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Illustration 6.7

The low mound at the tip of Eilean Mór, representing the remains of a gatehouse; view from within bank across the alluvial tail

within enclosure W, rectangular shaped with an internal area of about 8 by 11m, two sides of which is the perimeter bank (Illus 6.4). The lazy beds are in two groups, three or so aligned east-west with a length of about 18m separated by a drainage ditch from a larger group of 11 or 12 running SSW–NNE. They mostly have a length of about 27m and vary in width from about 3 to 4m from furrow to furrow. The lazy beds cover an area of less than a third of the island (excluding the alluvial tale). Cut through them is a hole (Z) about 2.7 by 2.7m, identified by the Royal Commission as a well.

On the south-east shore just below enclosure W are the foundations of a small rectangular structure (X), formerly reached by a path along the side of enclosure W. It is about 5 by 5m overall.

The ground rises southwards from the lazy beds to a low summit area with a burial ground and the ruins of a chapel (Q)



Illustration 6.8

The ruins of the chapel on Eilean Mór (September 2016, after conservation), looking towards its north wall

oriented approximately true east–west (Illus 6.8). It is rectangular, 10.1 by 6.1m, with lime-mortared walls, and is one of only two upstanding ruined buildings on the island. Adjacent to it on the highest part of the island is a level, clear area, readily identified as a burial ground with a square stone base (R), which excavation in trench 1 has shown to be the plinth for a cross. On the sloping ground between the chapel and the lazy beds are the turf-covered ruins of three buildings (T, U and V). Houses T and U have stone walls. House T is oval, about 9 by 6m overall, with its entrance facing downslope. The remains of house U show as a two-roomed structure about 15 by 5.5m. Structure V appears as an embanked hollow, 11 by 7m (Illus 6.9).

Sitting over the top of the turf bank defining the west side of the enclosure are the turf-covered ruins of a rectangular stone building (Y), 9 by 6.5m (Illus 6.10), and adjacent to it outside the enclosure, Y1, which appeared to RCAHMS to be a small yard with a dyke enclosing it to the west.



Illustration 6.9

House V with an entrance in house U in the foreground



Illustration 6.10

House Y with lazy beds in the background



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From the chapel a ridge of relatively high ground extends westwards along the southern edge of the island to the other upstanding ruin, structure C, 7.3 by 6.4m, which appears as two gable ends of lime-mortared masonry (Illus 6.11). Between the chapel and building C is a group of turf-covered ruins, most prominently house F, 10.5 by 7m, with opposed entrances in its long sides (Illus 6.12). Adjacent to F and probably contemporary with it is a small circular stone feature (G), which we now know overlies a medieval cobbled road. It is a kiln, diameter 4m, perhaps for burning lime for building operations rather than for drying corn. Perhaps also of similar date is house S next to the chapel, of similar form to F, 8.5 by 6m.

House F overlies two earlier houses, E and F1. Structures H and J are two rectangular houses, probably belonging with E and F1. Structure H is 12.5 by 7.5m in overall size, and F1 and J presumably had similar dimensions. The Royal Commission labels the space or passageway between C and E as D.



Illustration 6.11

The upstanding gables of house C, with the ruins of house B in the foreground



Illustration 6.13

House A, the great hall, with the screens area at the far end



Illustration 6.12

Houses on the ridge of Eilean Mór. The hollow in the foreground is building E; beyond it is house F, sitting over building E, and behind that can be seen a bank topped by house H



Illustration 6.14

House L with house K behind it



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being built partially over the ruins of an earlier one (L.1). Between the great hall, house K, Y1 and the ridge of higher ground is a relatively low flat area, which we now know is the result of post-medieval agricultural activity.

The end of the island to the west of the great hall is partitioned off by a lime-mortared wall, still partially standing several courses high (Illus 6.15). It shelters a complex of buildings identified by the Royal Commission as the probable residential quarters of the lords of the Isles. The main structure is P, the foundations of a rectangular lime-mortared building with an overall size of 11.5 by 6.8m (Illus 6.15). The construction of two later drystone houses, P.1 and P.2, within its ruins obscured the fact that it was another hall. There are only vestigial remains of structures M and N, two rectangular houses built on to the back of the partition wall. The partition wall extended northwards on to the shore to form a narrow chamber (M.1, Illus 6.16), and another wall also

extended from the north wall of P on to the shore, perhaps the vestigial remains of a building originally extending further to the north-west. Both perhaps had a defensive function. Excavation in trench 5 indicated erosion of artificial structures along the island shore adjacent to building P.

### Eilean na Comhairle

Eilean na Comhairle (English, 'the council island') is circular, 25m in diameter, rising to a height of less than 3m above water level, and lies some 45m to the south-west of Eilean Mór (Illus 6.17, 6.18). Because it is not normally accessible it is in summer clothed with a dense crop of long grass, nettles, thistles, etc, masking the ruins of three structures on its summit. The remains of a stone causeway connecting the two islands lie under the water. There is a 6m length mid-channel resting on a bare rock



Illustration 6.15  
The cross-wall partitioning off the end of Eilean Mór nearest Eilean na Comhairle, with house P beyond



Illustration 6.17  
Aerial view of Eilean na Comhairle



Illustration 6.16  
Structure M.1

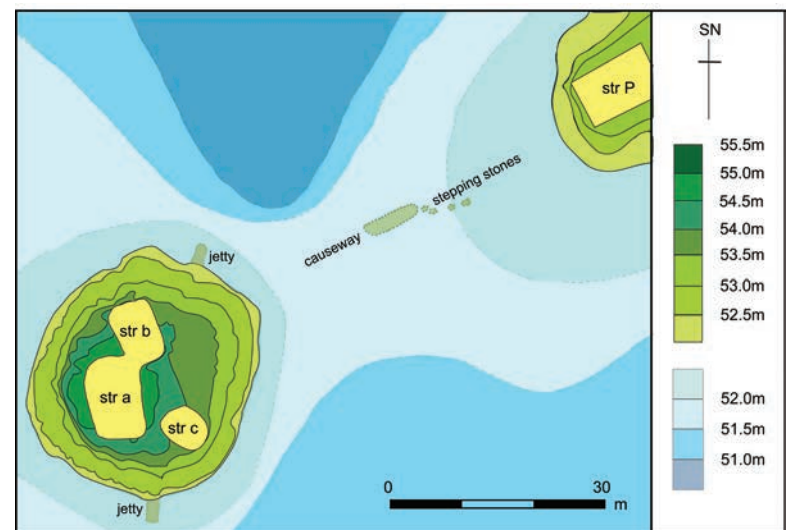


Illustration 6.18  
Eilean na Comhairle, contour survey

platform, with some of its stones scattered on either side. It is about 2m wide and is composed of large sub-rounded boulders, defining the two sides, with smaller stones packed in the narrow space up the middle (Illus 6.19). Only one course is evident but to have been an effective means of crossing the water dry-shod there may have been at least one other, and in places more courses.

When a dam was created on the edge of Eilean na Comhairle in the summer of 1997 to allow the excavation of underwater midden deposits (trench 25), the westwards continuation of the causeway to the island could be traced via aerial photography (Illus 13.37). Eastwards, there are a series of boulders that can sometimes be seen breaking the water's surface, serving as stepping stones. They would not enable the complete crossing from one island to another and may only have been positioned in recent times by sport fishermen. There is no evidence that these stepping stones replaced a missing stretch of causeway. There may only have been a need for them due to the erosion of the adjacent end of Eilean Mór. The use of the causeway in medieval times seems certain, although it is possible that it is earlier in origin. Two small boulder jetties on Eilean na Comhairle may relate to more recent access by fishermen and other visitors.

It was assumed that the bulk of the island results from the debris of human occupation over a long period of time but that at its core was a natural island, albeit of small size and no great height above the surface of the loch. Our limited excavations failed to reach or identify levels above loch bottom that were not the result of human intervention. The underlying rock is Dalradian limestone and phyllite, an extension of the same ridge as forms Eilean Mór. The rock is exposed as a shallow underwater platform extending at least 50m in a south-westerly direction beyond the smaller island, forming an area of shallow water. Here it is covered with a tail of boulders, some evidently tumbled from the collapse of structures on the island itself. Others may represent the residual remains of walls that extended from the island in this direction. It appears likely that erosion by wind and water ate away significantly at the exposed edges of the island in historic times.

The perimeter of Eilean na Comhairle from the jetty on its northern edge round anticlockwise to the jetty on its southern margin is composed of boulders and blocks of stone, some laid, some collapsed, but all the result of human activity (Illus 6.20). The remaining segment of shoreline adjacent to Eilean Mór is composed of silts and gravels. They form an apron extending underwater for a distance of about 6m before slipping down more steeply into a weedy channel with a silty floor. On this apron the depth of water is normally not any more than half a metre, with the channel reaching a depth of 1.5m (Illus 6.18). The apron appears to result from two processes, the natural creation of an alluvial tail in the lee of the island and the accumulation of midden material dumped here by the occupants in the past.

Prior to excavation it was clear that there were three houses (a, b and c) on the summit of Eilean na Comhairle, represented by turf-covered foundations (Illus 6.21). It is helpful to understand at the outset that the presence, shape and location of these buildings were to a considerable extent determined by major developments in the formation of the island in earlier times as a result of human activity. These were not at all evident prior to our excavations, but notably include the erection of a fort or dun, succeeded by a medieval castle (Illus 6.22).



Illustration 6.19

Surviving underwater stretch of the causeway between Eilean na Comhairle and Eilean Mór, drawn from an image taken from a drone; scale approximate

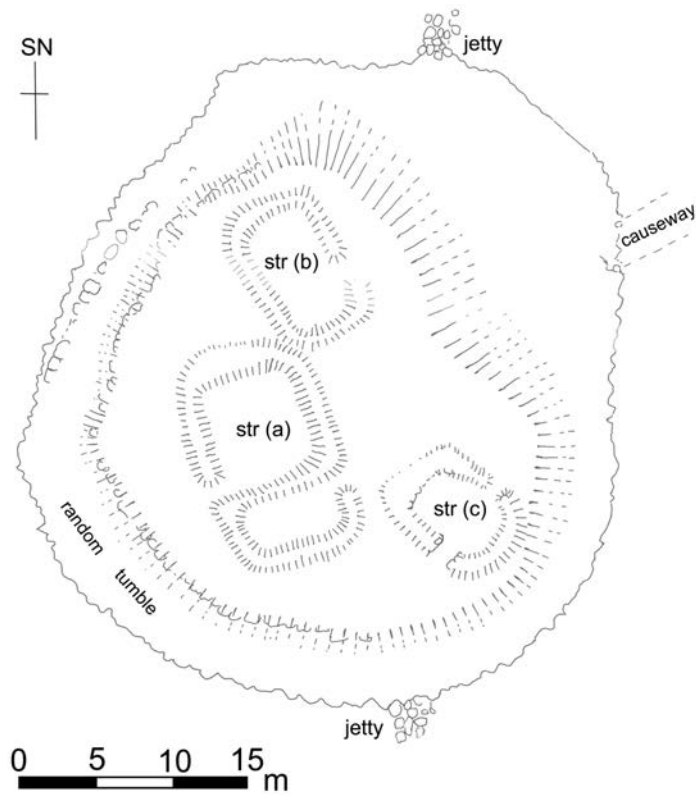


Illustration 6.20

Eilean na Comhairle, boulders round edge. Work in trench 23 in the background



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It was only as a result of our excavations that it became clear that much of the island consists of the ruins of a dun with massive drystone walls. Although only a very small part of this was exposed in our excavations, essentially in trench 23, it was possible to use this information, along with other observations of the island surfaces, both on the ground and from examination of aerial photographs, to interpret a circular fort with an overall diameter of about 20m. Its walls seem to survive for a height of up to 2m around much of the island. The dun was levelled and infilled with rubble in order to act as a platform for the castle, the presence of which had also been unsuspected. It in turn was flattened, but some of its walls remained in a reduced state to support houses (a) and (b).

Illustration 6.21  
Plan of Eilean na Comhairle, redrawn from original survey by RCAHMS

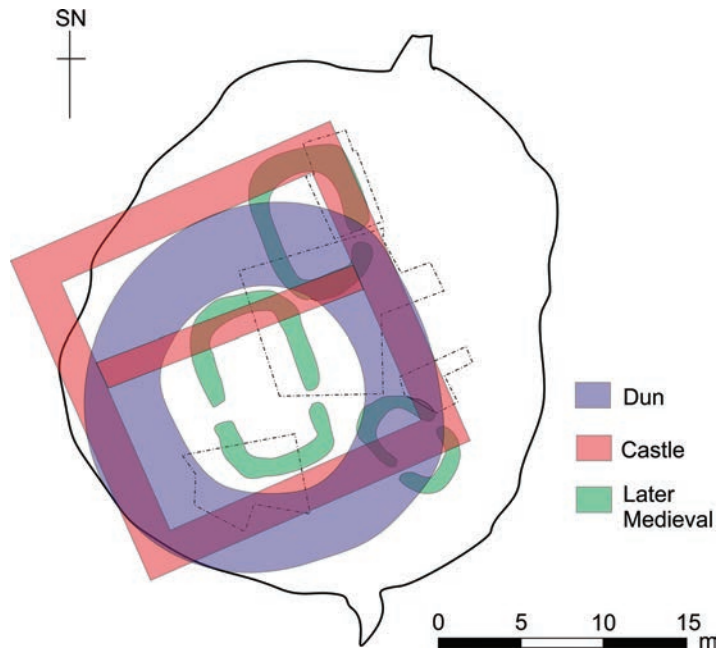


Illustration 6.22  
Eilean na Comhairle, composite interpretative plan