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The Archaeology of Finlaggan, Islay

David Caldwell

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Chapter 1

METHODOLOGY

The core concern has always been the excavation of the two islands, Eilean Mór and Eilean na Comhairle. As the project developed so too did a clearer understanding of how to put this in context. Archaeological parallels for any discoveries at Finlaggan obviously had to be sought in a wider area, starting with Islay, then moving to Argyll and Northern Ireland before going further afield.

Documentary research

A programme of searching out and analysing all documents relating to Finlaggan has been a key part of the project from start to finish. The approach has always been to use such written sources as a guide to interpreting the archaeological evidence. Historical information on Finlaggan and the wider world of which it was a part is presented in this volume before the archaeological results and their interpretation. The history is not simply what was known prior to the excavations but has been improved and amplified as the project developed. The last few years have seen several scholars turn their attention to elucidating the history of the West Highlands, perhaps some motivated by renewed interest by archaeologists, and our insights into Finlaggan have benefited enormously as a result.

Archaeological survey

Excavation soon revealed evidence for human activity at Finlaggan spanning the whole of post-glacial times, and it was evident that the site was part of a much larger landscape containing significant traces of past human activities and occupation. In order to understand the local context of the site, we undertook a wider archaeological survey of the area around Finlaggan, identifying and examining all traces of human activity visible in the landscape, and underpinning this with documentary research. It is not argued that this study area is in any way typical, or a good example, but it is hoped that when much more work of this sort has been done in Scotland it will provide valuable comparable data.

The study area consists of the area around Loch Finlaggan, including its catchment and moorland to the north and west. It corresponds to the extent of the farms of Portanellan, Robolls, Kepolls(more) and Sean-ghairt, as shown on the map of Islay surveyed by Stephen McDougall, 1749–51 (Smith 1895: between pp 552 and 553). In 1993 the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) undertook an electronic distance measurement (EDM) survey of much of this area on our behalf, plotting structures and field systems at a scale of 1:1000.

We made detailed plans of most of the archaeological sites and ruined buildings, either by plane-tabling or by taking measurements with a tape. Typically the salient features of an earthwork would be marked with garden canes and the distances between canes recorded on a sketch made in the field. A drawing, normally at a scale of 1:100, would then be produced at base, and adjustments made as necessary on a further visit to the site. In most cases little attempt has been made in these drawings to reproduce the extent of ruination. Other plans which are not based on survey work in the field, but largely derived, for instance, from aerial photographs and early Ordnance Survey maps, are described as sketches.

Detailed surveys of the area between Eilean Mór and the Finlaggan Visitor Centre were made by a survey team from the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments of England in 1994 on behalf of the Channel 4 television show *Time Team* and made available to us. A bathymetric survey of the north end of Loch Finlaggan was undertaken by divers from the British Geological Survey. We lacked the resources to sample the wider study area by excavation. An exception was made for two sites, one a settlement site at Rudh' a' Chròcuin and the other the mound at Cnoc Seannda, identified as potentially the site of inauguration ceremonies for kings or lords of the Isles. Both were suggested by us as worthy of examination and were initially tackled by the Time Team. Otherwise, all excavation was limited to Eilean Mór and Eilean na Comhairle.

Survey work on the two excavated islands was made relatively easy thanks to use of the plan prepared by RCAHMS in 1981, published three years later along with a detailed description (RCAHMS 1984: no. 404, pp 275–81). Some minor alterations have been made to this in the light of new measurements taken with EDM and re-examination of the visible humps and bumps, but we must acknowledge how the Commission's work has underpinned our own and been the basis for our understanding of Finlaggan. We have adopted its lettering to identify structures and buildings.

Most of the survey work done by us on the two islands, apart from the detailed planning within the trenches, depended on the use of EDM. In 1989 we placed some pegs to form the basis of a local grid system used for all recording on the two islands (Illus 8.1): 300N runs through the centre of the great hall. Its orientation from magnetic north = −30 degrees 04 minutes 00 seconds, and all plans and drawings based on the site grid have an arrow pointing to 'site north'. The peg labelled SN. 300E/300N, which is equivalent to NGR NR 138825.737 668117.190, was adjacent to the exterior of the east wall of the great hall, 3.65m from both

the adjacent internal corners of the building. The temporary site benchmark was on the east wall of the great hall, on a prominent block of stone *c* 2.7m north of 300E/300N, estimated as 54.80m above sea level.

Overlapping and extending well beyond the survey area was a detailed study of lead mining on Islay, undertaken as part of the Finlaggan Project by Mike Cressey and as part of the requirement for a doctorate awarded by the University of Edinburgh in 1995. It was expected that the availability and exploitation of mineral resources would have a bearing on why Finlaggan was a centre of importance in the medieval period. Turning this area of work into a postgraduate research project was a sound strategy to attract other sources of funding and acquire the support of an experienced environmental archaeologist.

Geophysical prospection

Geophysical prospection was limited to a survey of part of Eilean Mór with a fluxgate gradiometer and the use of a metal detector in the hands of an experienced operator. The metal detector was used experimentally on an area of Eilean Mór, later partially excavated as trench 19, to see if it could provide an effective indication of human activity. 'Hot spots' were plotted, not excavated. The detector, however, was also used from 1992 onwards to locate metal objects from the excavated deposits. It was salutary to observe just how many metal objects were not seen by skilled and experienced archaeologists, even with careful trowelling. Rather than marking 'hot spots' in the trenches for the attention of the excavators, it was found best to detect spoil once it was removed. This, of course, required careful soil management in order not to lose the contexts from which the finds came. Detecting was also extended to a survey of the edges of the loch, the gravelly shores normally covered with water where it was clear there were no stratified archaeological deposits. In 1994 geophysical surveys of areas at Cnoc Seannda and around the standing stone beside the Finlaggan farm-steading were undertaken on behalf of the Time Team.

Excavation

Excavation was undertaken in the summer of every year from 1990 to 1998, excluding 1996. The period of work was normally four weeks, with at least some activity on-site every day of the week, even in the worst of weather (Illus 1.1). Sometimes, as will be evident from the results reproduced here, the rain failed to abate at the right time to take presentable photographs. Inevitably many trenches were backfilled with some deposits and contexts unexcavated but only in four cases, trenches 2, 8, 12 and 16, was it deemed sound strategy to examine these in a subsequent season.

As an experiment, in 1994 excavation was staggered over a period of 12 weeks with only a small team for most of that time. There did not appear, however, to be any advantages in this approach.

All digging, including de-turfing and backfilling, was done by hand. Excavation of archaeological contexts and features was invariably done with trowels.

The excavation team in all seasons consisted of students and volunteers, many of them local, and a small group of professionals who acted as site supervisors and provided specialist support as surveyors, draughtsmen, conservators, environmental archaeologists, etc. In 1993 and 1994 the dig was specifically run as a training exercise for archaeology students, mostly from the University of Edinburgh. In 1993 significant extra support and expertise was provided for an intensive period of three days when a *Time Team* television programme was filmed for Channel 4. In 1997 excavation of underwater deposits off Eilean na Comhairle was made possible by the skill and effort of the Edinburgh University Officers' Training Corps in building a coffer dam.

The location and extent of each trench excavated was agreed in advance with Historic Scotland. Apart from the removal of turf, the bulk of the digging was done with trowels, and for the most part only deposits identified as collapse, debris, fills, etc were removed. To a limited extent earthworks were sectioned and sondages excavated through floor surfaces to examine underlying deposits. The desire to leave walls and roads intact effectively curtailed opportunities of exposing any sizeable area of any but the most recently occupied areas and structures on the islands. The

Illustration 1.1
The 1992 season: flood waters

complete excavation of any building was not considered to be an option.

The area of Eilean Mór is reckoned as 7,100 sq m. The 17 trenches opened on the island amounted to an area of 917 sq m, a bit less than 13% of the island's land surface. Eilean na Comhairle has an area of 700 sq m, of which 133 sq m, or 19%, was dug into in three trenches.

Soil samples were taken from most archaeological deposits. It is regrettable that due to loss in transit and changes in personnel, many of these were not available for study during the post-excavation process. Soil flotation was undertaken on selected deposits from 1993 onwards. Sediment cores from the loch, the alluvial tail of Eilean Mór and elsewhere in Islay were taken and examined for environmental data by Mike Cressey as part of his PhD research.

In 1997 Helen Smith undertook an elemental analysis of 79 soil samples with the aim of better distinguishing anthropogenically enhanced soils from 'natural' soils, topsoil, construction materials,

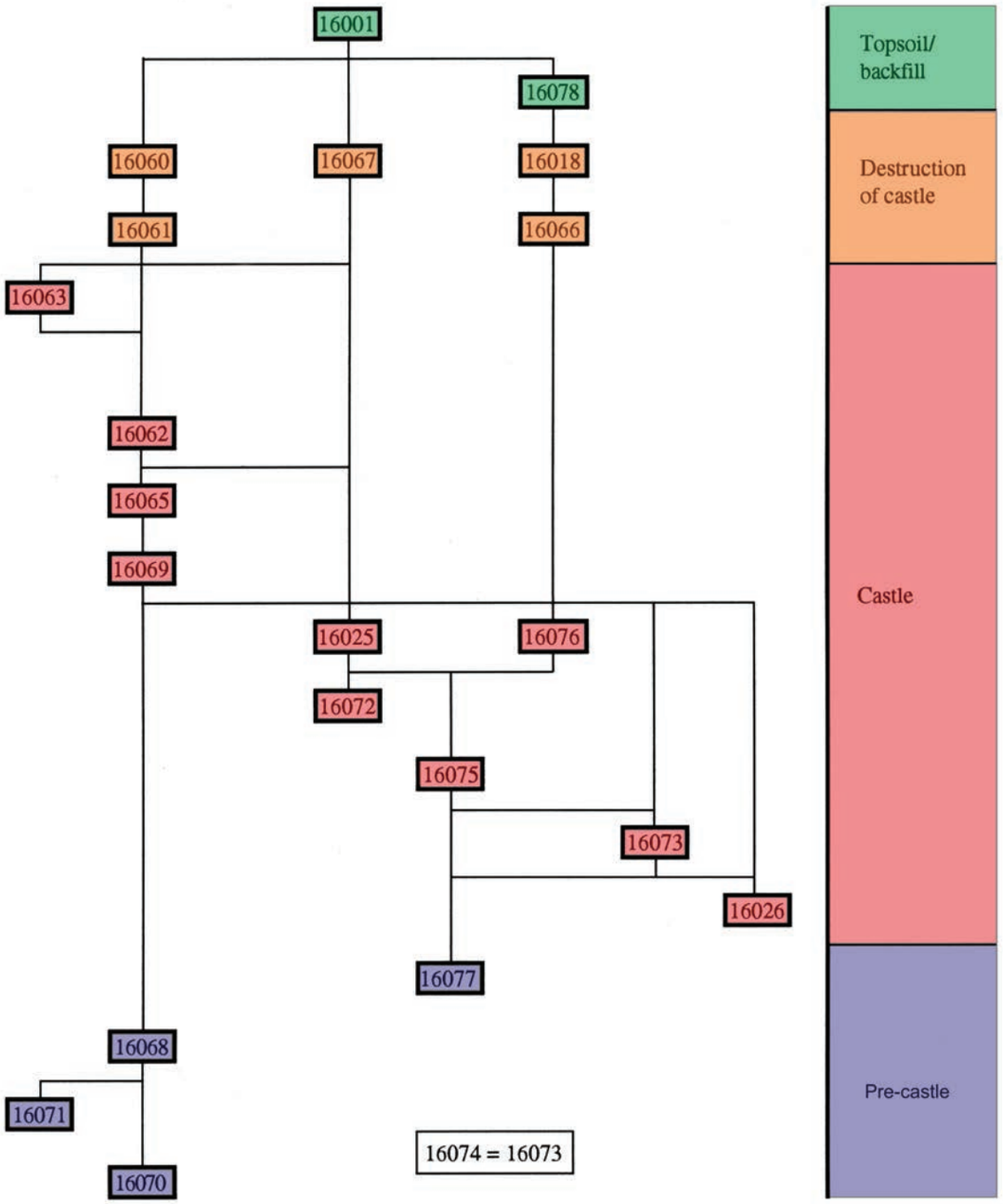

Illustration 1.2
Trench 16 (1994) matrix

Context	Description	Interpretation
16001	Turf and topsoil	Turf and topsoil
16018	Thick deposit, soil, clay, rocks	Levelling up in courtyard
16025	Lime mortared wall	North/south castle wall, east of courtyard
16026	Lime mortared wall	East/west internal castle wall
16060	Stone fragments and soil	Demolition tip to east of wall 16025
16061	Mortar and sand	Demolition tip from 16025
16062	Clay-bonded stonework	Castle plinth
16063	Silty sand	Old ground surface
16065	Pieces of phyllite, 30% sand, silt	Make-up for 16062
16066	Sand and mortar layers	Castle floor
16067	Soil and mortar fragments	Debris overlying 16025
16068	Soil	Old ground surface
16069	Silt and fine sand	Earliest silt against 16025
16070	50% phyllite frags, 50% sand	Pre-castle medieval
16071	Piece of red sandstone, burnt	Lying on 16070
16072	Massive rounded boulder	Foundation of 16025
16073	Flat stones and black soil	Make-up for floor of castle
16075	Cut	Foundation trench for 16025
16076	Phyllite chips, mortar, silt, soil	Fill of 16075
16077	Rubble, 40% sandy silt	Infill of dun?
16078	Mixed deposit	1993 backfill

Table 1.1
Trench 16 (1994), simplified list of contexts

etc. Although it appeared that valuable information could be derived from this approach, it was not pursued any further. A copy of Dr Smith's report has been lodged in the site archive.

Finds, including sherds of pottery, fragments of metal, etc, were individually plotted using EDM, except in trench 25, where they were located to a square metre and spit within a context. In processing this data we have attempted to extract as much meaning as possible out of the distribution of finds around the site. Initial conservation of many of the finds was provided on-site by conservation staff from National Museums Scotland (NMS), and different techniques of scientific analyses have been explored with varying degrees of success. A programme to recover lipids from pottery sherds did not produce any results, while X-ray fluorescence (XRF) analysis of copper alloys is of considerable interest. Much finds processing and conservation was carried out in NMS, especially of wet wood and leather. All the ironwork was X-rayed at NMS and this was used as a basis for selecting pieces for conservation.

Plans and sections were drawn on-site at scales of 1:20 or 1:10, the majority by a professional archaeological planner, David Connolly. After a brief experiment with single context recording, it was decided to use a traditional method of planning. Each trench or area was meticulously planned after the topsoil was removed, and overlays were produced to record changes and additions as work progressed. The upstanding walls were also drawn and the rock types identified by a professional geologist, Nigel Ruckley. Record photography, 35mm colour film (transparencies) and black and white (prints), was backed up in 1993–94 by video (Hi8). Harris-type matrices were prepared for every trench, demonstrating the relationships of all the excavated or exposed contexts, deposits or features, and indicating the preferred phasing. The number of contexts per trench varied from 26 in trench 20 to over 200 in trench 12. Illus 1.2 is an example of the matrix prepared for one of the smaller trenches (16, in 1994), with a simplified list of contexts in Table 1.1.

Trench 25 excavation and recording

In 1997 midden deposits on the bottom of the loch, adjacent to Eilean na Comhairle on the side facing Eilean Mór, were sampled from within the confines of a dam. The excavation methodology and recording were different from systems used previously at Finlaggan. Apart from the constraints imposed by working in a

confined space that had to be constantly pumped dry, the advanced planning process recognised the need to deal with waterlogged material, sieve large quantities of deposits on-site, and efficiently record and remove large quantities of samples and artefacts for post-excavation analyses.

The plan adopted was to grid the whole area into metre squares. The squares in the main working area were in rows from C to G and columns from 4 to 8. Thus each square could be identified by a letter and number, from C6 to G8 (Illus 13.39). Excavation of any depth was confined to one block of five adjacent squares (C8, C7, C6, D8, D7), a sixth separate one (G4) and three small sondages (2, 4 and 5), the latter two of which were actually dug through the fringe of Eilean na Comhairle itself. All of this work in 1997 was labelled as trench 25.

As elsewhere, archaeological contexts were given a five-digit number starting with 25. Since the main midden and crannog deposits [25008, 25019] were of considerable depth, mostly with no obvious structure or layering within them, they were dug in spits each only a few centimetres in depth, labelled alphabetically within each context from A at the top. On-site recording normally took the form D7008F, C8019G, etc. In these examples D7 and C8 are the metre squares, 008 and 019 are the archaeological contexts 25008 and 25019, and the final F and G are spits within the contexts.

Individual artefacts were listed in a running series as SF 25***. Plans and notes produced on-site in 1997 are oriented to magnetic north. In this report, for consistency with the rest of the site data, plans and descriptions have been changed to align with site north.

Dating

The excavations demonstrated that there was a significant depth of archaeological deposits in most areas excavated, and there was little difficulty in showing their associations and relative sequence. In many cases it is possible to equate deposits from one trench to another with little or no cause for doubt. Absolute dating evidence is altogether more uncertain. There are few finds from stratified contexts that can be used to date a deposit to anything more precise than a period, like the Bronze Age or Middle Ages. Remarkably, one or two do in fact seem to confirm historical information, like the halfgroat from the chapel which indicates erection or renovation by John I Lord of the Isles, and a group of late 15th-century coins which appear to relate to destruction or demolition about the time of the final forfeiture of John II Lord of the Isles and the capture at Finlaggan of the leaders of Clan Donald South.

It does appear that our excavations exposed considerable evidence for 16th-century activity on Eilean Mór, possibly extending well after 1600. A challenge in interpreting this is the total lack of artefacts of which it can be said that they date to within that time frame and no other.

The excavation of hearths and ovens in 1993 presented the opportunity of taking samples for archaeomagnetic dating, and convincing dates were provided by GeoQuest Associates for three of the five contexts sampled. In each case two date ranges are suggested. These ambiguities arise from the looping nature of the geomagnetic secular variation in the 12th–15th centuries. The contexts and dates in question are as follows:

- 16043: hearth or area of burning on the floor of the castle on Eilean na Comhairle. Either 1230–1310 AD or 1420–75 AD. The former is preferred on stratigraphical grounds.
- Hearth in building H.1. Either 1080–1220 AD or 1440–1550 AD. The former is probably to be preferred.
- 12173: fired, compact clay surface in building 12.7. Either 1425–75 AD or an age centred on 1290 AD. The latter date appears more likely on stratigraphic grounds.

The contexts which failed to produce convincing dates are as follows:

- 12142: floor deposit in building 12.2.
- 12165: oven in building 12.6.

It was considered that the archaeomagnetic vectors from these contexts were either too dispersed or too few in number. The GeoQuest Report is lodged in the Finlaggan Archive.

Radiocarbon dating was carried out sparingly through lack of appropriate organic samples and because most of the deposits they came from were manifestly of medieval or more recent date. Other potential samples, like animal bone from the fill of the chamber on Cnoc Seannda (trench 21), were rejected because there was a significant element of doubt as to whether the original use of the feature was being dated or else some secondary disturbance.

In 1999 eight samples for radiocarbon dating were passed to the Scottish Universities Research and Reactor Centre. Three of them were from archaeological contexts; the other five were from a sediment core taken in March 1999 in the tip of the alluvial tail of Eilean Mór. The results are as follows:

Sample AA-36530 (GU-8675)

Material	Human bone: left humerus
Context	1050: inhumation in lintel grave in burial ground, Eilean Mór
Radiocarbon age BP	1365±50
Calibrated age ranges	1σ cal AD 643–86, cal BP 1307–1264
	2σ cal AD 602–771, cal BP 1348–1179

Sample AA-36531 (GU-8676)

Material	Wood: alder (worked)
Context	Tr 25 G4017: upper crannog structure, Eilean na Comhairle
Radiocarbon age BP	1540±45
Calibrated age ranges	1σ cal AD 434–598, cal BP 1516–1352
	2σ cal AD 419–637, cal BP 1531–1313

Sample AA-36532 (GU-8677)

Material	Wood: hazel branch wood, 7 years old
Context	Tr 25 G4022: lower crannog structure, Eilean na Comhairle
Radiocarbon age BP	2030±45
Calibrated age ranges	1σ cal BC 89 – cal AD 46, cal BP 2038–1904
	2σ cal BC 168 – cal AD 71, cal BP 2117–1879

Sample AA-36533 (GU-8678)

Material	Marsh sediment: humic acid dated
Sample selection point	Immediately below unit 10
Radiocarbon age BP	11,515±75
Calibrated age ranges	1σ cal BC 11,840–11,461, cal BP 13,790–13,411
	2σ cal BC 11,874–11,216, cal BP 13,824–13,166

Sample AA-36534 (GU-8679)

Material	Marsh sediment: humic acid dated
Sample selection point	Immediately above unit 10
Radiocarbon age BP	11,305±70
Calibrated age ranges	1σ cal BC 11,475–11,201, cal BP 13,425–13,151
	2σ cal BC 11,827–11,071, cal BP 13,777–13,021

Sample AA-36535 (GU-8680)

Material	Marsh sediment: humic acid dated
Sample selection point	Unit 7/8 boundary
Radiocarbon age BP	9410±65
Calibrated age ranges	1σ cal BC 8781–8608, cal BP 10,731–10,558
	2σ cal BC 9108–8479, cal BP 11,058–10,429

Sample AA-36536 (GU-8681)

Material	Marsh sediment: humic acid dated
Sample selection point	Unit 7 middle
Radiocarbon age BP	7320±55
Calibrated age ranges	1σ cal BC 6228–6082, cal BP 8178–8032
	2σ cal BC 6331–6029, cal BP 8281–7979

Sample AA-36537 (GU-8682)

Material	Marsh sediment: humic acid dated
Sample selection point	Unit 7/6 boundary
Radiocarbon age BP	7795±60
Calibrated age ranges	1σ cal BC 6678–6509, cal BP 8628–8459
	2σ cal BC 6797–6467, cal BP 8747–8417

To a limited extent, artefacts also provided opportunities for dating the contexts in which they were discovered, but here it is appropriate to sound a note of caution on this process, most easily demonstrable from sherds of wheel-made pottery. For instance, three sherds of a vessel in a reduced gritty fabric (SF 7096, 7119, 7158) were excavated in trench 7 on Eilean Mór. This is a ceramic type that was imported to Finlaggan from the Scottish mainland, probably in the 13th century. SF 7158 was incorporated in the wall [7039] of house V.1, occupied until the end of the 15th century. The other two sherds were recovered from 16th-century or later contexts.

That there were any sherds of medieval pottery on Eilean Mór was largely an accidental outcome from innumerable tidying-up processes involving rubbish being removed off the island and dumped in the loch. The examples of joining sherds cited above suggest that many of the sherds excavated on the island may not have been recovered from contexts with which they were associated when the vessels were actually in use. The implications of this for the use of ceramics and small finds in characterising and dating phases of activity on a complex site are considerable.

The distribution of roof slates on Eilean Mór is, however, crucial to our understanding of relative chronology. At some date in the medieval period the great hall was roofed or reroofed with slates of semi-pelitic schist, described by us as 'type A'. There was archaeological evidence for the hall being dismantled, we think about 1500, in line with other archaeological evidence from our trenches and our understanding of historical events. So, when quantities of these roof slates turned up as drain covers in a neighbouring building (12.5), it seemed a reasonable deduction that building 12.5 was erected after, perhaps not long after, 1500. This inference underpins much of our understanding of Finlaggan in later medieval and post-medieval times.

Another distribution pattern that informed our understanding of relative dating on Eilean Mór was the system of paved or cobbled roads spreading from the jetty to link up the major medieval structures. Their uniformity suggested that they belonged to a scheme which may have been executed over a short period of time. Some stretches may have remained in use into post-medieval times, but we have judged that none are likely to have been ignored or built over prior to about 1500 when, we reasoned, Finlaggan's function as a major lordly and ceremonial centre came to an end. So the erection of buildings B and P over the line of these roads has been taken as an indication that they must post-date 1500.

Some shortcomings

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy for the author to identify things he would have done differently or improved upon if he were embarking on the project now. A knowledge of Gaelic would undoubtedly have improved his understanding of Islay and its history. He would have preferred to have finished the post-excavation work and writing up much sooner. He accepts responsibility for the delay. The lack of radiocarbon dates was the result of a deliberate decision, influenced by a prevailing notion that such determinations would tell us little we did not know about medieval contexts. It is now clear that that was misguided.

The author was keen while fieldwork was being undertaken not to get bogged down in particular parts of the excavation strategy and lose sight of the overall aim of forming an overview of the use of the whole of the two islands over time. This meant that at the end of each excavation season there were unanswered questions in several of the trenches, excavation options that could have been pursued with more time. Difficult decisions then had to be made as to whether to leave it at that or to reopen trenches in the following year. The author now thinks it would have been better for our understanding of the site if more attention could have been given to the complex of buildings excavated in trenches 2, 4 and 12 and on Eilean na Comhairle.

There is undoubtedly more analyses that could be undertaken of the finds to improve our understanding of Finlaggan. The author hopes that he has provided sufficient information for others to undertake that work in the future.

Perhaps his biggest regret is that, despite there being a strategy in place for sampling for environmental data, it has not been possible to provide a comprehensive picture based on the analysis of data, including seed and insect remains, that were observed to be present. The main reason for this, as alluded to above, was the loss of samples and other data after the completion of the excavations in circumstances beyond the author's control. He believes it would be relatively simple to construct a new sampling programme sometime in the future that would produce quality

results and which could be achieved with relatively little new disturbance of the site.

Since commencing fieldwork at Finlaggan the author has referred to the work in many publications and written several papers and interim reports. Many of these are referenced in the texts that follow. He makes no apology, however, for the obvious fact that his interpretations, understanding and knowledge have changed considerably over the years, hopefully always for the better. He has not deemed it appropriate or practical to correct most of his earlier misapprehensions. The versions in this volume are what he now believes. They supersede anything published earlier under his name.

Finally, readers may notice changes of style and editing from one part to another. This is the result of this report being worked on, on and off, over a very long period of time. The writer hopes that they are not so great or confusing as to inhibit understanding.