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# The Archaeology of Finlaggan, Islay

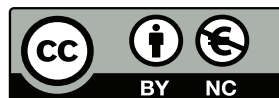
David Caldwell

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# The Archaeology of Finlaggan, Islay



Frontispiece

Loch Finlaggan with the islands of Eilean Mór and Eilean na Comhairle, and the hills of Jura in the background

# The Archaeology of Finlaggan, Islay: Excavations at the Centre of the Lordship of the Isles, 1989–1998

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## Dedication

To all past and present members of the Finlaggan Trust and the people of Islay



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# SYNOPSIS

This volume reports on a major archaeological project undertaken at Finlaggan in Islay. Two islands, Eilean Mór (the large island) and Eilean na Comhairle (the council island), in Loch Finlaggan were recognised as a historic site, the excavation of which might provide more information on what was happening in the Western Isles, particularly, but not exclusively, in the Middle Ages. The Lordship of the Isles had long been recognised by historians as an important phenomenon, a serious challenger to the Stewart dynasty for control of much of Scotland. The documentation for it was thin and archaeology offered the best way forward to gaining a better understanding. Finlaggan had already been identified as the centre of the Lordship of the Isles, a place where the inauguration ceremonies for the MacDonald Lords of the Isles took place and where the Council of the Isles met.

Parts I and II provide historical background on Finlaggan and an archaeological survey of a wider area around Loch Finlaggan, including an inventory of sites and monuments dating from pre-historic times to the present day. There is considerable evidence for medieval and post-medieval field systems, lead mining and townships deserted in the 19th century. Part III provides detailed information on archaeological research and excavations. At Rudh' a' Chròcuin on the edge of the loch, a medieval or post-medieval turf-walled house was examined, and excavations on top of the nearby mound at Cnoc Seannnda uncovered a Bronze Age kerb cairn and a prehistoric rock-cut chamber lined with slabs. On Eilean Mór a wide range of medieval structures was explored, including fortifications, a great hall, kitchens, dwelling houses and a chapel. The adjacent burial ground dated back at least to the 7th century. On Eilean na Comhairle there was a large masonry tower of about 1200 replaced in later medieval times by houses, one of which can be identified as the council house of the lords of the Isles. There was also evidence for prehistoric activity on the two islands extending back to Mesolithic times. Under the tower

on Eilean na Comhairle were substantial remains of a dun and a crannog. On Eilean Mór post-medieval houses and structures associated with a high-status residence, a timberwork fort and a farming township were also examined.

The assemblage of artefacts, bones and other environmental material is dealt with in Parts I and II of the online catalogue. For the medieval period much of this provides information on the structure and use of different buildings, contacts with the wider world, trade and manufacturing, and the lifestyle and dress of inhabitants and visitors. Of particular importance is waterlogged material from a 13th-century midden at the bottom of the loch adjacent to the tower on Eilean na Comhairle. It represents the consumption of a lordly household.

In Part IV an interpretation and overview is provided of the evidence amassed in the course of the project. Possible origins for Finlaggan as a centre of power and ritual are traced back to pre-historic times and a case made for it being a *thing* (assembly) site in the Viking age. The erection of the tower on Eilean na Comhairle marks a significant development. It is suggested that it was built for Ranald, son of Somerled, King of the Isles.

In the 14th and 15th centuries Finlaggan was developed by King Ranald's MacDonald descendants as a palace and an administrative hub. Finlaggan really was the centre of the Lordship of the Isles and is deserving of being better known and understood, since the lords exercised authority and patronage over considerable swathes of Scotland, and much of what is now recognised as being quintessentially Scottish actually has its origins in the West Highlands and Islands.

Finlaggan appears to have been destroyed or dismantled about 1500, coinciding with the demise of the Lordship of the Isles. Eilean Mór remained a centre of local importance for MacDonald chiefs. Occupation of the two islands only seems to have ceased in the early or mid-17th century.



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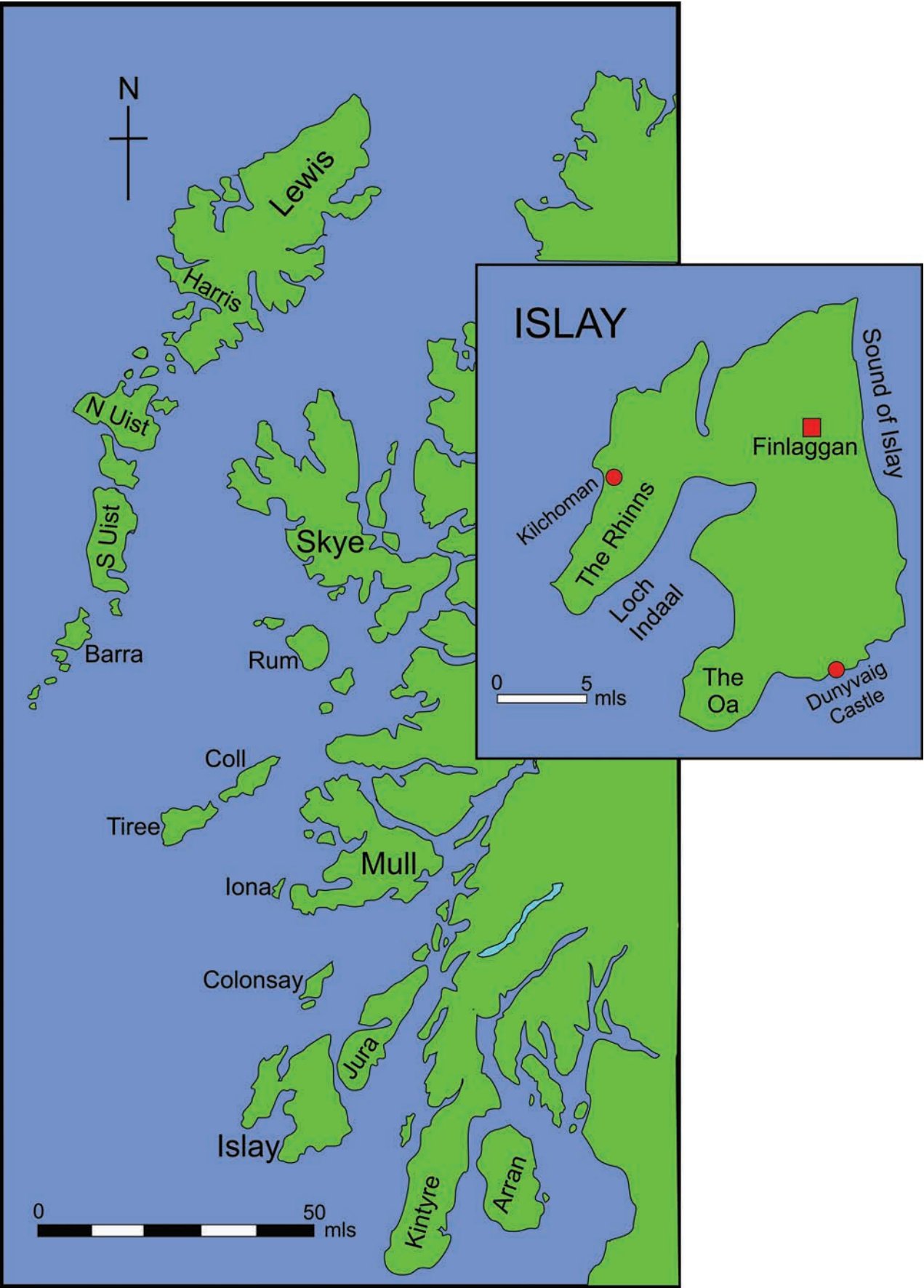


Illustration 0.1  
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