



Society of Antiquaries
of **Scotland**

The Archaeology of Finlaggan, Islay

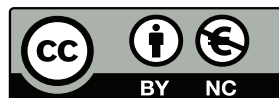
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INTRODUCTION

In 1988 the Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland expressed a desire that the Museums should undertake an archaeological research excavation in Scotland. The Finlaggan Archaeological Project was the result. The initial reason for choosing Finlaggan was that it was an important medieval centre, the study of which might lead to a greater understanding of a region of Scotland, little studied and understood (Illus 0.1). The Museums contained important material from the medieval West Highlands and such a project might help to provide more information on them, and more objects for display.

Two islands in Loch Finlaggan were identified as the historic site and focus of the research project. Both islands, Eilean Mór (Gaelic, ‘the large island’) and Eilean na Comhairle (Gaelic, ‘the council island’), were scheduled ancient monuments, and it was therefore also crucial to convince Historic Scotland (the predecessor of Historic Environment Scotland) of the merits of the project and receive the necessary permission to dig. Excavation commenced in 1990 and remained almost totally confined to the two islands, but we soon realised the desirability of setting this work in a wider context. Our fully developed strategic plan for the project had the following five objectives.

First, we desired a greater understanding of 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 exceedingly thin, and archaeology offered the best way forward to gaining a better understanding. It seemed clear to us when we started the project that Finlaggan was the type of site which would have good archaeological deposits of the medieval period, and this has been amply borne out by our work. Other excavations on medieval sites in the West Highlands had been so few and far between that we did not consider we ran any risk of needlessly duplicating other researchers’ results.

Finlaggan had already been identified as the centre of the Lordship of the Isles by several historians. In particular, a new edition in 1961 by R W Munro of Donald Monro’s 1549 description of the Western Isles brought renewed attention to the early traditions of inauguration ceremonies for the lords of the Isles at Finlaggan (not actually mentioned in the dean’s account), and the meetings there of the Council of the Isles. It was obviously a site of national importance, and a second objective of our work was to throw some light on Finlaggan as a centre. We were encouraged by the recent formation of the Finlaggan Trust, with its committee and much of its membership based on Islay. We

believed – rightly – that the support and collaboration of such a body would help in the development of the project.

The Trust recognised that there was increasing interest in Finlaggan and was intent on encouraging this by making visits to the site easy, enjoyable and informative, while at the same time managing access so that wear and tear to the place was kept to an absolute minimum, the integrity of the remains was not compromised or violated, and the process of decay to the upstanding remains was arrested. Archaeology is a necessary part of such schemes, whether as part of the conservation programme on upstanding structures or as a means of explaining the significance of different features on the site. It was, therefore, an important aspect of our project that we should cooperate with the Trust.

Our third objective was to explain why Finlaggan was a site of such strategic importance in the Lordship of the Isles. We postulated as possible reasons for this the relative quality of the land for agriculture and/or stock-rearing, the exploitation of deposits of lead and silver, and ceremonial traditions extending backwards to earlier times. We further proposed that Finlaggan might have acted as a centre for the redistribution of the surplus food and other commodities produced in the lordship, a place where people gathered, perhaps at set times or seasons, to do business, where law was dispensed and administrative arrangements were made. The programmes of environmental work, fieldwork and excavation initiated by us were designed to evaluate these ideas.

Fourth, our commitment to Finlaggan gave us the opportunity to make a wide-ranging archaeological study of a compact area of land, defined as the area around Loch Finlaggan, in geographical terms taking in the catchment area for the loch, and including the old farms of Portanellan, Mulreesh, Robolls, Kepollsmore and Sean-ghairt as shown on the map (Smith 1895: pl V) derived from the mid-18th-century survey by Stephen MacDougall. While appreciating Finlaggan’s unique importance as a centre in the medieval period, it was also our objective to place this in the wider context of human occupation of this part of Islay from the first arrival of people on the island to the present day. We anticipated that our environmental programme in particular would demonstrate human impact on and use of the land at Finlaggan in prehistoric times. We were impressed by the survival of medieval and more recent buildings, field systems and mining remains in the vicinity of Finlaggan. Documentary evidence for the post-medieval period suggested that Finlaggan had no special status after the collapse of the lordship, and we hoped that a fieldwork survey would not only provide a context for the later history of Finlaggan but be a

suitable paradigm for more recent developments elsewhere in the West Highlands.

Fifth, because Finlaggan was perceived all along as a research project, we wanted to encourage other research initiatives, using Finlaggan material.

The detailed examination of our Finlaggan study area has been set in context with essays on the history of Islay and the West Highlands and Islands in the medieval period. The writer has considerable sympathy with the view of the 17th-century MacDonald historian who complained that previous Scottish historians were ‘partial pickers of Scottish chronology and history [and] never spoke a favourable word of the Highlanders, much less of the Islanders and MacDonalds, whose great power and fortune the rest of the nobility envied’ (MacPhail 1914: 10). A full reassessment of the contribution of Highland culture to the story of Scotland is still a worthy aim and it is hoped that this volume will contribute to that in a positive way.

We do not pretend that we have totally succeeded in dealing with our objectives or that there are not other matters that we could or should have given attention to. I hope, nevertheless, that it will not appear presumptuous to suggest that renewed interest in the historic site of Finlaggan and improved access to it are the most important achievements of the project. Of course, it is primarily the Finlaggan Trust which has been responsible for this, but I believe we have in no small measure helped. Before the excavations commenced Finlaggan was little visited, even by the islanders, and reaching the site involved a pot-holed track barred by three gates, a muddy field and a boat-crossing.

Now the Finlaggan Trust has an excellent visitor centre with ample parking space. The track is asphalted, and the main island can be reached by timber walkways and a bridge. The Trust has a programme in place for the conservation and display of the ruins, and already much has been done. There are discreet display panels which do not detract from the overall appearance of the place. It is also apparent that not only many islanders have now visited and enjoyed Finlaggan but it is also a must for most visitors to Islay.

Acknowledgements

Finlaggan has occupied much of my time from 1989 to the present day, and a considerable amount of my thoughts. I believe the person who first suggested Finlaggan to me as a worthy subject of a research excavation was Jonathan Triscott, and for that I am very grateful. At the time, the summer of 1988, we were both working on an excavation at Auldhill in Ayrshire and I had never even visited Islay. A reconnaissance trip later that year gave me my first view of the site. It would be nice to say that I instantly fell in love with the place, but as with Isabel Grant (1935: 403) ‘one’s first impression is most disappointing – only a few insignificant fangs of masonry . . . in an uninteresting loch, set in a hollow in green, featureless moorland’. I soon, however, came to appreciate the true beauty of the place. I have experienced it at all times of the year in every conceivable weather. I believe the place has a certain magic about it!

My first visit to Islay also gave me the opportunity of introducing myself to the newly formed committee of the Finlaggan Trust, and I have had a close involvement with the Trust ever since, as a committee member and trustee. Without the Trust, our

task would have been much harder and less pleasant, and we would have had difficulty in understanding and enjoying Islay. Happily, the chairman of the Trust for most of the time of the dig was Donald Bell, also the tenant farmer of Finlaggan. From the very beginning Donald has made sure that we take the interests of Islay into account, and only do what can be considered best for Finlaggan. He has been instrumental in the National Museums developing a programme of cooperation with the Trust, particularly for displaying the excavation finds on the island. He is also a good friend who went out of his way to help us in our task.

We are grateful to many other people on Islay for their help and kindness, not least the landowners, Islay Estates, and their factors, and also the late Bruno Schroder of Dunlossit Estate. We were helped out with advice, equipment and services by several local organisations and businesses, including the Museum of Islay Life and Islay and Jura Girl Guides (for the hire of a marquee and toilets); accepted many offers of help on the dig; and were welcomed into many homes and establishments, including the Ballygrant Inn and Harbour Bar.

The two islands, Eilean Mór and Eilean na Comhairle, are a scheduled monument. We are grateful to Historic Scotland (now Historic Environment Scotland) for supporting our applications to dig on them and for facilitating our work.

We sought cooperation with other bodies, including the Department of Archaeology in the University of Edinburgh, which provided much of our student workforce. The student Archaeology Society accepted the challenge of surveying the deserted settlement at Sean-ghairt, and Dr Geraint Coles was responsible for setting up a Science and Engineering Research Council grant which enabled Michael Cressey to do environmental archaeological research for the project in the form of a PhD.

Our efforts to get to grips with the visible remains at Finlaggan would have been rather faltering if it had not been for the plan and description of the site published by the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS 1984: no. 404). The more work we have done at Finlaggan, the more we have come to appreciate their skill and accuracy. In 1993 the Commission generously responded to our request to map the field systems around Loch Finlaggan. If it had not been for this we would have found it very difficult to gain a clear understanding of the context of the historic site, and we would not have been in a position to create the full project reported on in this volume. We are also grateful to Mathew White of Conservation Specialists Ltd, who conserved the upstanding walls on Eilean Mór in 1997, for advice and information on his work.

In 1994 we persuaded Channel 4’s Time Team to make Finlaggan the subject of their first television programme from Scotland. Apart from being good fun, and providing good publicity, it allowed us access to equipment and expertise that would otherwise have been lacking. The Time Team brought in the underwater archaeologist Dr Nicholas Dixon, who demonstrated that there were extensive midden deposits in the loch adjacent to Eilean na Comhairle.

The material got from sampling the underwater deposits has proved to be of great significance. We did not opt for a conventional approach of using specialist archaeologists equipped with sub-aqua gear. Instead we decided to work ‘dry’ from within a

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coffer dam. We are extremely grateful to Major S Smith RE SO2 Engineers Scotland at Army HQ, Craigiehall, for responding to our request for help and for arranging for the Edinburgh University Officers' Training Corps, ably led by Paul Andrew, to design and build the dam for us. Some of the team, led by Wayne Crossley, also surveyed several of the buildings at Mulreesh, and Finlaggan so worked its charms on our army colleagues that they built a splendid bridge to provide access to Eilean Mór, and undertook other work on behalf of the Finlaggan Trust. We were all extremely impressed by their dedication and enthusiasm.

Most of the finance for the project has been provided by the National Museums of Scotland, but welcome assistance was also received from others. Miller Construction of Edinburgh provided the hut which acted as our equipment store and office throughout the project. Generous grants of money were given by the Russell Trust, the Hunter Trust, the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, the Mid-Argyll Natural History & Antiquarian Society, the Schroder Charitable Trust, Morrison Bowmore Distillers Ltd, the Clan Donald Lands Trust, the Glencoe Foundation and Historic Environment Scotland.

Last, but not least, I would like to record my appreciation of the efforts and dedication of all the staff, specialists and volunteers who have worked on the project (Illus 0.2). At times there were more than 30 people working at the site, in several different trenches or operations. It is only possible to direct such a project adequately if the director has complete confidence in the ability of his staff. This was never in doubt. A good outcome is also heavily dependent on discussing – or arguing – every interpretation as it is advanced and having a good recording system. We all tried our best never to settle for the likely or approved interpretation

until we were sure we had dismissed every other possibility, and I believe we have a recording system that supports our conclusions or will allow others to review them.

A key team member was Gordon Ewart, Deputy Director, with whom I have worked since 1980. Gordon was closely involved in conceiving and planning the project and I was able to rely on his experience and judgement for much of the actual digging. Most of the staff had in fact already worked on other projects with either Gordon or me.

For help and companionship with studying and surveying the sites around Loch Finlaggan and elsewhere on Islay I am particularly indebted to Nigel Ruckley and Roger McWee.

Table 0.1 lists those who took part in the field in the years from 1989 to 1997.

The whole process of 'post-excavation' to achieve this publication has also occasioned debts of gratitude to several other friends, colleagues and specialists. The written contributions of many of them are identified in this volume, and to them can be added many members of staff of the National Museums of Scotland who have conserved and researched finds and samples. I am particularly grateful to Jackie Moran and Alice Blackwell for helping me with a lot of my work and facilitating access to museum facilities after my retirement. Thanks are also due to Dr Jim Tate, Dr Anita Quye and Dr Kathy Eremine for their analytical work on the finds. Trevor Cowie, Dr Alison Sheridan, Fraser Hunter and the late Alan Saville advised on prehistoric finds; Theo Skinner, on the woodwork; and Nigel Ruckley and Simon Howard, on geological matters. Many of the illustrations of small finds were drawn by Marion O'Neil.

Other colleagues and friends provided much help and advice, including Geoffrey Stell and Tom McNeill on architecture; John



Illustration 0.2
The Finlaggan excavation HQ

FINLAGGAN

Raven, Rachel Barrowman, Colin Breen, Stephen Carter and Clare Ellis on archaeology; Tam Ward and Alan Calder in processing finds as part of the post-excavation study; Alan Macniven on Viking Islay and its place-names; and Alan Miller and his colleagues at the University of St Andrews on visual reconstructions of Finlaggan. Thanks are also due to Alan Miller, Robert Hay, John Gater, Raymond Lafferty and the late Mick Ashton for permission to use and reproduce illustrative material.

The other contributors to this volume wish to make their own acknowledgements as follows:

Val Dean – George Haggarty and Sarah Jennings for assistance in identifying sherds of imported pottery.

Jo Dawson – Catriona Gibson for her initial study of some of the handmade pottery, Ann MacSween for advice on pottery and Tim Holden for identification of organics in handmade pottery.

Mark Hall – Prof Thomas Clancy for rescuing him from some Celtic pitfalls and providing some useful references on Irish material.

Judy Holmes – Douglas McKean at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Leonie Paterson, Tracy Collins and Peter Spencer; also Carol and Malcolm Ogilvie for collecting and identifying the plant species presently growing at Finlaggan.

Authorship

This volume has been edited by David Caldwell. Except where otherwise stated, the text is also by David Caldwell, having taken the advice of others directly involved in the project. The photographs of Finlaggan, unless otherwise stated, including those of the excavations, are also all by David Caldwell. The plans, drawings and maps in their published form are also the work of David Caldwell. He would like to acknowledge here the skill and professionalism of the team members, especially David Connolly and Gordon Ewart, who did much of the on-site planning on which these are based. The pottery drawings are the work of Val Dean, and many of the small find illustrations are by Marion O'Neil. Her most important contributions are indicated in the captions in the Catalogue.

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Name	Seasons	Position	Notes
Archer, Harriet	1997	Volunteer	
Askey, Joanna	1994	Volunteer	
Atherton, Chrissie	1992	Volunteer	
Baker, Fiona	1992–94	Supervisor	Trs 7, 14, 17, 18
Beyer, Kathryn	1992	Volunteer	
Boardman, Sheila	1993–94	Environmentalist	
Bonner, Kate	1993–94	Volunteer	
Bornholdt, Katherine	1992–93	Volunteer	
Brind, Anna	1997	Volunteer	
Bryce, Tom	1990–91	Conservator	NMS staff
Brydone, Hamish	1997	Volunteer	
Burgess, Chris	1992–94	Surveyor	
Burke, Andrew	1994	Volunteer	
Burnett, John	1990	Computer manager	NMS staff
Caldwell, David	1989–97	Director	NMS staff
Callander, Sarah	1997	Volunteer	
Cameron, John	1992	Volunteer	
Chesher, John	1990	Geologist/diver	BGS staff
Clark, Jane	1993	Conservator	NMS staff
Cloughley, Cora	1997	Volunteer	
Collins, Guy	1993	Volunteer	
Connolly, David	1990–94	Draughtsman	
Cressey, Mike	1991–97	Environmentalist	University of Edinburgh
Dadds, Jo	1991	Volunteer	
Davis, Mary	1993–94	Conservator	NMS staff
De Smith, Melanie	1994, 1997	Volunteer	
Dean, Val	1991, 1992–97	Supervisor/volunteer	Tr 21
Dunbar, Alison	1994	Volunteer	
Dundas, Alistair	1997	Volunteer	
Esquivias, Chantal	1993	Volunteer	
Ewart, Gordon	1989–94	Deputy director	Trs 3, 6, 7, 18
Falconer, Jim	1992	Site manager	
Fox, Lindsay	1991–92	Volunteer	
Gibson, Catriona CCCatrionaCatriona	1993	Volunteer	
Goldsmith, Jenny	1994	Volunteer	
Haigh, Richard	1997	Volunteer	
Hall, Gordon	1997	Volunteer	
Halley, Aileen	1992–93	Volunteer	

Table 0.1
Staff and volunteers

FINLAGGAN

Name	Seasons	Position	Notes
Harbison, Jeff	1997	Volunteer	
Hawbury, Lucy	1997	Volunteer	
Henderson, Margaret	1992–93	Volunteer	
Herd, David	1992–94	Volunteer	NMS staff
Hill, Jeremy	1994	Volunteer	
Hogg, David	1992–93	Conservator	NMS staff
Hood, Frances	1991–97	Volunteer	
Hutchins, Laura	1997	Volunteer	
Jackson, Adam	1993	Volunteer	
Jenkins, Steve	1997	Volunteer	
Johnston, Dave	1997	Volunteer	
Kane, Joe	1994	Volunteer	
Kelly, Fearghal	1997	Volunteer	
Kerr, Grant	1997	Volunteer	
Kerrigan, Ann	1993–94, 1997	Volunteer	
Laura	1989		
Lee, Jim	1994	Volunteer	
Levack, Hester	1994	Volunteer	
Levy, Andy	1993	Volunteer	
Lutzker, Mark	1992–94	Volunteer	
MacDonald, Isabel	1990		
MacIntyre, Mairi	1991–92, 1994	Volunteer	FN Trust
MacKay, Irene	1989		
MacKenzie, John	1993	Volunteer	
MacKenzie, Rona	1991–92	Volunteer	FN Trust
Marlow, Lisa	1993	Volunteer	
Martin, Ana	1993	Volunteer	
Maury, Laurel	1994, 1997	Volunteer	
McDonald, Hector	1997	Volunteer	
McDonald, Rory	1991	Volunteer	
McLean, Michelle	1994	Volunteer	
McQueen, Bill	1991–92	Volunteer	
McWee, Roger	1992–97	Detectorist	
Melville, Brian	1992–93	Conservator	NMS staff
Miller, Robin	1992	Volunteer	
Monk, Mopsy	1997	Volunteer	
Montador, Duncan	1992–93	Volunteer	
Moran, Jackie	1990–94, 1997	Finds assistant	NMS staff

Table 0.1 (cont.)
Staff and volunteers

INTRODUCTION

Name	Seasons	Position	Notes
Morgan, Stephen	1994	Volunteer	
Morrison, Ian	1990	Software expert	NMS staff
Morrison, Lynne	1994	Volunteer	
Mudie, George	1994	Volunteer	
Newton, Norman	1989–91, 1993–94, 1997	Supervisor/volunteer	Tr 2
O'Neill, Caragh	1993	Volunteer	
Paterson, Leonie	1993–94, 1997	Environmentalist/volunteer	
Peddie, Kenny	1997	Volunteer	
Purdie, James	1993–97	Volunteer	
Quinn, Alex	1994	Conservator	NMS staff
Radley, Alan	1992–95	Supervisor	Trs 9, 12, 19, 21
Reid, Lizzie	1990, 1992–94	Volunteer	
Ritchie, Mathew	1993	Volunteer	
Robertson, Susan	1993	Volunteer	
Rodak, Justyna	1993	Volunteer	
Roy, Colin	1991	Volunteer	FN Trust
Ruck, Andrea	1993, 1997	Volunteer	
Ruckley, Nigel	1989–97	Geologist	BGS
Schaer, Andrea	1994	Volunteer	
Shannon, Rory	1997	Volunteer	
Sharman, Paul	1992–94	Supervisor	Trs 8, 18
Skinner, Theo	1990	Conservator	NMS staff
Smith, Alan	1997	Volunteer	
Stevenson, Maria	1997	Volunteer	
Stewart, David	1989–94, 1997	Supervisor	Trs 1, 4, 11, 16, 23–25
Stinson, Johnny	1997	Volunteer	
Strobridge, Jill	1997	Volunteer	
Swift, Catherine	1994	Volunteer	
Thompson, Billy	1997	Volunteer	
Thorogood, Peter	1997	Volunteer	
Tonner, Susan	1991	Volunteer	
Torrie, Pat	1993	Volunteer	
Triscott, Jonathan JonJonathan	1989–94	Supervisor	Trs 5, 8E, 10, 15, 19
Usher, Paul	1991	Volunteer	
Vesligaj, Nevenka	1994	Volunteer	
Warsop, Clive	1997	Environmentalist	
Weatherup, Moira	1994	Volunteer	
Williams, Grizelda	1997	Volunteer	
Zajac, Tomasz	1993	Volunteer	

Table 0.1 (*cont.*)
Staff and volunteers

