

## Project Design

### Archaeological Topographic Survey

#### Eilean an Tighe and Eilean Garbh, Shiant Isles

##### **1 Introduction**

On each of the three principal islands - Eilean an Tighe, Eilean Garbh and Eilean Mhuire - making up the Shiant group, there are traditions of a chapel site and the islands as whole are considered to be sacred (Daniell 1820, 54). Although the islands have been briefly described by visitors from Martin Martin onwards, there is clearly considerable confusion in the names given to each of the three islands and to the possible ecclesiastical remains on each. Little attention has been paid to the islands in more recent times, until the then owner's desire to learn more about them resulted in an ongoing archaeological project led by Pat Foster which began in 2000.

On Eilean Mhuire, which is slightly separated from the other two islands, are the stone footings of what is usually assumed to be a medieval chapel dedicated to St Mary. Eilean Mhuire is the most fertile of the three islands and the outlines of a number of turf buildings, which are potentially medieval in date, can be seen on the flat plateau close to the chapel. The identification of this site as the chapel dedicated to the Virgin relies on the equation of Eilean Mhuire with Martin's Island-More (Nicholson 2002, 144). However, Eilean an Tighe, the most southerly of the three islands, was known as Eilean na Cille prior to the nineteenth century and a sketch by William Daniell, dated 1818, shows the stone footings of a chapel, which he calls St Mary's, in a position which can be clearly identified as being close to that of the later cottage in the lower of the two settlement areas on the island. A number of twentieth century visitors to the islands record the existence of burials in the vicinity of this area of settlement and the low mound which lies just to the north of the present bothy, has been identified as a possible cemetery mound (Nicholson 2002, 145; Foster 2004). On the OS First edition map the name, Annat, usually associated with the site of an Early Medieval church, is given to one of the two settlement areas on Garbh Eilean. Annat lies on the south west side of the island, in a sheltered hollow at the base of the valley which divides the island roughly in half. This area is enclosed within a substantial D-shaped earth and stone bank, which recalls those surrounding Early Medieval monastic sites; within this enclosure are the footings of two roundhouses, lying to one side of a later bank and the area has clearly been occupied over a long period.

Archaeological survey and excavation has been ongoing on Eilean an Tighe and Garbh Eilean, which are connected by a spit, under the direction of Pat Foster since 2000. Following an initial walkover survey, all the sites were catalogued, described, photographed and, where appropriate, surveyed using a plane table. As a result of this work, it was recognised that the black rat population of the islands was causing considerable damage to the archaeological resource. The upstanding remains of buildings provide shelter for the rats, which are, as a result, causing considerable damage by burrowing into the walls. In consequence, excavation has been targeted on a number of sites. Within the upper settlement area on Eilean an Tighe, a cross-inscribed pillow stone was discovered upside down in the floor levels of the largest blackhouse, the sequence for which now extends from the Iron Age through to the eighteenth century. At Annat, one of the two substantial circular structures has now been excavated to below the level of the upstanding walls. This structure has provided evidence for occupation, which on the basis of the ceramic evidence, seems to extend from the Iron Age through to the Early Medieval period. Finds have included glass beads and spindle whorls, although nothing as yet to positively confirm the possible Early Medieval ecclesiastical connotations of the place-name. Smaller scale exploratory excavation has been undertaken on a range of other structures, while in the lower settlement area on Eilean an Tighe, buildings known to be used by lobstermen after the permanent settlement on the islands ended in 1901, have been cleared of modern rubbish down to their occupation levels. Initial environmental sampling has also been carried out and nearly all the sites so far identified have now been recorded with a Garmin 12 hand-held GPS. However, no topographic

survey has so far been undertaken and this seems an essential next stage in the project. This will be carried out during the 2005 excavation season, timetabled for 28<sup>th</sup> May - 25<sup>th</sup> June.

## **2 Aims and Objectives**

This survey is intended to record in detail the two of the three areas on the Shiantis which have either physical or documentary evidence for ecclesiastical remains of potentially Early Medieval date.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

to record in detail the remains at the lower settlement area on Eilean an Tighe and the area within the enclosure at Annat on Garbh Eilean.

to establish a control framework within which the ongoing excavation data can be set, as well as the already completed plane table surveys.

to use this survey data to assess the significance of the ecclesiastical remains within the context of the Shiant Isles, as well as within the Western Isles as a whole.

## **3 Methodology**

The archaeological work already undertaken on the Shiantis has suggested the high archaeological potential of both the lower settlement area on Eilean an Tighe and of Annat on Garbh Eilean. Detailed topographic surveys of these areas will be an important tool in understanding the complexity and length of occupation at each of these sites and in targeting future excavation work. It is intended to undertake the survey using a Total Station, which will enable the remains to be recorded accurately in three dimensions for the first time. As part of this process, a detailed contour map of both areas will also be built up, which should aid in understanding the relationships between the visible features. It is hoped that the survey results will also provide a means of documenting the current condition of the remains, which will provide a benchmark against which ongoing damage by the black rat population can be measured. A framework of fixed survey points will be established to enable the survey to be extended in the future, as well as to help in locating excavation trenches.

The logistical difficulties of working on an uninhabited group of islands without power has to some degree determined the areas to be targeted during this phase of survey. In particular, survey on Eilean Mhuire would require access to a boat to take the team to the island and - given the difficulties of landing on the island and climbing up onto the plateau - it would seem sensible for the survey team to camp there during the duration of the survey. If this was to be done, the opportunity should be taken to record the whole of the occupied parts of the island, a larger task than can be accomplished as part of this current project. As Eilean Garbh is attached by a spit to Eilean an Tighe, personnel and equipment can be got more easily across to Annat, although since this involves a 300ft climb up a gully, this is again dependent on good weather. The individual settlement areas on Eilean an Tighe and at Annat are, however, relatively small and discrete and can be recorded without the need to establish complicated traverses. A generator will be hired for the duration of the survey to enable maximum use of the EDM during the week which it is on the island. This will also enable the data to be downloaded at the end of each day and checked.

In spite of the provisos given above, it is to be hoped that in the future the survey can be extended to the other principal settlement areas on all three islands, and that - through the use of a sub-1m GPS system - all the sites on the islands can be located with reference to Ordnance Survey data.

## **4 Products**

A contoured map of each of the principal survey areas will be produced at a suitable scale (?1:500). The more detailed plane table surveys of individual buildings already undertaken by Pat Foster and his team can then be set into this framework. A short written report on the findings of the survey will

be compiled, drawing on comparative data, where appropriate. The report will include a location plan, any relevant illustrative material and a full index to all records generated during the survey.

Copies of the survey will be submitted to Historic Scotland, the Western Isles Archaeologist, and will be included on the Shiant Isles website ([www.shiantisles.net](http://www.shiantisles.net)). A summary of the work, for inclusion in *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland*, will also be compiled. Any archive material, such as photographs, generated during the course of the project will be deposited in the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland archive.

References:

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- Nicolson, A., 2002. *Sea Room*. London: Harper Collins.

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