

Fieldwork report for 2009
Patrick Foster

The 2009 season on the Shiant by the regular members of the project was funded solely by the members themselves. This meant that it was not possible to entertain bringing students from the Czech Republic, which has been our normal means of acquiring an experienced work force, while at the same time giving archaeologists from Central Europe the opportunity to experience Scottish archaeology and culture. This tradition is less important now that it is nearly twenty years since the Velvet Revolution in Prague and Czech students can be found all over the world enjoying the fruits of their much improved economic situation. Archaeological excavations were therefore of a limited nature aiming to finish the excavation of the RI 41B site on Garbh Eilean and to undertake very minor evaluation trenches to verify the nature of certain “non-site” features in the Lower Settlement Area of Eilean an Tighe.

GARBH EILEAN

Site RI 41B. Iron Age and Early Medieval Roundhouse.

The excavation of the final levels within the roundhouse RI 41B on Garbh Eilean had been suspended while the excavations of Area F at the HI 15 blackhouse site were completed in 2007. The site had been covered and re-turfed until it was possible to return and in 2009 the reduced project profile encouraged its reopening. When the excavation had been interrupted a broken half of the Late Iron Age floor worktop slab (54) had been lifted revealing a blackened greasy clay (67) with abundant animal bones patchily covering what appeared to be the jumbled rubble of the underlying platform. This suggested that the remaining Iron Age deposits were not of any great depth. Their continued excavation was therefore approached with the expectation that only a few days were required to complete the internal area of the roundhouse.

Clay soil (67) was restricted to the southern half of the internal hut area. The northern west quadrant of the area up to the exposed possible north wall (59) of the Iron Age hut was filled with a layer of orange burnt ash with a clay texture (86). The, possibly, robbed and disorganised rubble of the wall did not allow an accurate distinction between itself and the clay so that it was not possible to determine whether the orange clay was contained within the hut wall or whether it was earlier without dismantling the stonework. This layer had been cut or worn deeply in many places so that it presented an uneven appearance and exposed a brown clay (87) beneath, which may be the same as the black clay (67) in the southern half since they merge together without any distinct interface across the central portion of the hut floor and it also occupied the complete northern portion of the exposed area.

Earlier excavations had revealed that there were deep voids in the stone rubble of the platform fabric at this low level and it was assumed that water draining down the hillside through this uncompacted, unstructured rubble had encouraged some of the hut deposits to wash through and presumably drain away to the sea. However it was also known from an early excavation that rat runs existed, especially around the southern inner bottom edge of the interface between the early medieval and the late Iron Age phases.

As soon as the excavations began in the southern half of the hut it became clear that the rats were using the hill washed voids and a large nest was encountered in the south-east quadrant filled with limpet shell and bird bones. This may present a problem in interpreting the faunal assemblage.

Since without further excavations beyond the southern side of the early medieval stone hut wall it

cannot be said with absolute certainty that this black clay layer is the primary Iron Age hut floor soil accumulation or if it is some pre-hut layer covering the platform stonework. At present however it is assumed that it represents the earliest accumulating living surface of the Iron Age hut (assuming that the hut actually exists) since it does contain calcinated bird bones and a large number (346 sherds) of very fragmented pottery. However it is most likely that there was a soil covering the platform at some time, either natural or deliberately spread, before the more substantial occupation occurred, levelling the surface of the stone rubble and it is assumed that the brown clay (87) revealed in the northern half of the hut is such a soil. The relationship with this clay with the black clay (67) with its abundant cultural material in the southern half, which appears to be on the same level, is not absolutely clear.

The black colouration of (67) does not appear to be caused from it being impregnated with a massive amount of charcoal dust from occupation activity, although this is the area where the Iron Age hearth is located. The texture and colour of this clay is superficially identical to the clay found at the base of the peat and lying directly on the surface of the bedrock. It can also be found in exposures along the coast line below relic glacial till deposits and is thought to be a clay produced by the degradation of the surface of the basalt bedrock. In recovered specimens it is a very fine sticky and greasy clay without visible gritty inclusions or residual rock fragments.

Possibly the best resolution to this problem is that the black clay is a natural clay, although it may have been deliberately re-deposited to level the platform along with the brown clay. During the primary occupation of the hut (or on the open platform) cultural material was deposited on its surface along with a black peaty soil which was trampled into this very pliable bedding. It should be taken into account that other, later Iron Age floor accumulations have also been very black, greasy and clayey, although they can usually be distinguished by the large quantities of charcoal dust present.

The excavation in the southern half of the hut was terminated at the jumbled surface of the platform stone with the intention to investigate the nature of the platform at some other time and at some other point outside the living areas of the huts.

Excavation in the northern half ceased at the same level, however on a hollow within the platform stonework bordered on the east side by a large, possibly placed stone block, was a hearth deposit of compacted stiff orange coloured burnt peat clayey soil (88). Three body sherds of thick walled pottery and several struck flakes of metamorphosed mudstone. Further struck flakes of mudstone were recovered pressed into the brown clay (87) amongst the platform stone rubble to the east of the hearth. These finds appear to indicate that the hearth and surrounding deposits are from some activity on the platform before the late Iron Age hut was built. Both the lithic and the ceramics suggest a date around the late Bronze Age – Early Iron Age transition (8th-5th centuries BC).

Comment

When the initial rapid survey of the archaeology was done in 2000 I thought that this site with its stone built roundhouses on a platform in a sheltered coastal valley was similar to Allt Chrystal on the island of Barra and suggested that its date could also be comparable, ie Neolithic to Early Bronze Age. Excavations soon showed that I had been rash to assume that such similarities could be used to form chronological interpretations. The fact that as the excavations proceeded and it was revealed that the early medieval site had a late Iron Age precursor it did not change this lesson. Now however, although the lesson still retains its validity, the accumulation of evidence is indicating that the original use of this platform, perhaps even its construction or adaptation, may lie in the late Bronze Age or even earlier after all.

With the completion of the internal area of this hut we have accumulated, from a variety of contexts of late 18th century, 7th to 8th century and late Iron Age dates, 42 struck flints and 18 struck mudstone fragments. Most of these lithic artifacts are most certainly residual, however the material found in the lowest contexts, which underly the Iron Age hut occupation levels, are almost certainly in their right context. This would appear to substantiate the conclusion that the platform was first occupied at least as early as the Late Bronze Age - Early Iron Age in a similar fashion to the early occupation of the blackhouse site HI 15 on Eilean an Tighe. Indeed one wonders if there is not a strong correlation between the two events at these two preferred settlement sites. The lack of Neolithic evidence from the excavation of the several preferred settlement locations may suggest that the occupancy of the islands may have begun in the Late Bronze Age, but that does not take into account that so far we have very little hard data from Eilean Mhuire and ignores the strong possibility of the Mesolithic presence suggested by Ann Clarke in her coarse stone report.

At this point it may be appropriate to consider the reasons for the activity at so many different periods of time in this particular locality. Firstly it may be reasonable to assume that a great deal of erosion has occurred since the landscape settled down after the Ice Age and it is safe to assume that the land extended much further out to sea from its current position. However by the Late Bronze Age the sea may have eroded the seashore back to a point where the sea was eating at the edges of the present *Annat* bay area.

The agricultural potential of the island in general is controlled to some extent by the high western area being exposed to the prevailing winds, the formation of a sheltered hollow plateau in the center of the high eastern block and the general slope of the land down to the south. The potential in the *Annat* valley and embayment area in particular is relatively higher than the rest of the island. The north to south glen down to the *Annat* bay is steep sided on the east side, but is less inclined on the western side providing many sheltered areas suitable to cultivation as witnessed by the early modern lazy bed field systems. The inclines involved are steep enough to ensure that rain fall and drainage from higher ground has a focused outlet in the stream which runs to the sea in a clear and deeply cut defile. In the bay area a sloping coastal bench also provides a small area suitable for arable agriculture.

Apart from small areas exposed in the eroded sea cliffs and reefs in the tidal zone where access to beach cobbles can be gained at low tide, there are no permanently exposed beaches. The bay coastline has a steep rocky edge which makes drawing any boat up onto dry land an almost impossible task. However dry landings can be made in fair weather and at certain times in the tidal cycle in some of the eroded dykes. Whether such landings were possible or if the situation was so different in prehistoric times, which is quite possible, that access to the sea was much easier cannot with certainty be verified.

The topographical situation is surprisingly similar to that of Allt Chrysal on Barra where a platform was constructed close to the low coastal cliff edge at the bottom of a sheltered steep sided glen, drained by a swift running stream. Although the agricultural potential of the area was limited, the platform was sited in an excellent position to take advantage of the rich food resources living in the shallow waters of the Sound of Vatersay with access to small areas suitable for grazing and growing crops. In the case of *Annat* the platform it is also located to take advantage of the resources of the bay area and there are similar if not slightly better areas of grazing and potential arable land. However the faunal analysis of the small bone assemblage from the Late Iron Age and the early medieval contexts indicates a predominance of burnt bird bone suggesting that the adjacent cliffs where nesting can be easily caught provided the main food resource. In fact the easily traversed southern cliffs close to *Annat* are today the nesting ground for a variety of sea birds and the steep northern cliffs, which are much more difficult to access from *Annat*, are relatively close.

Although this is a major difference between the two sites both of them most likely began to be occupied only on a seasonal basis during the nesting season in the case of Annat or as a base to exploit sea resources at Allt Chrystal in the initial phases, becoming a more permanent or at least forming substantial settlement later. Further excavation will no doubt help to elucidate the situation, however an important factor which must be taken into account is that at both sites we have very little information concerning the disposal of waste products and since both sites are at the coastal edge it is quite likely that most refuse was merely tossed over into the tidal zone.

A further result of the excavations, and once again proof of the value excavating or sampling as many sites as possible, is that some of pottery fragments from the primary Iron Age hut deposits is made with a distinctive fabric not found on any other of the main excavation sites. The clay matrix is packed with small quartz grains, some very rounded, which may be foreign to the Shiant, although it would be useful to test fire some of the post glacial clay deposits, which are beginning to be increasingly exposed, before this is claimed for certain.

Importantly, although not found on the other excavation sites, pottery with this fabric has been found in Test Pit 5 in association with a hearth buried below a scree deposit in the Lower Settlement Area on Eilean an Tighe. Therefore it is almost certain that a Late Iron Age site of similar exists at that location and not a medieval one, which was the initial consideration when the fabric was first examined when the pit was excavated.

Slowly we are gaining a picture of the settlement pattern across the centuries on these two islands, which increasingly exposes Eilean Mhuire to excessive speculation regarding its status in the pre-early modern period.

RI 40 Modern Sheep Fank

The general survey of the Annat site had shown that the enclosure wall around the site was U shaped with the open end being filled with the leading edge of the platform. Also it was noted that the east arm of the U came down the hill-slope to terminate at the east end of the platform and in doing so past the end of the sheep dip of the modern sheep fank (RI 40). The proximity of the two features appeared so close that if the sheep dip was emptied of recently deposited stone rubble and rubbish it might be possible to see the wall either in section or as the west facing elevation. Such an exercise would also allow an inspection of the construction and nature of the dip. This could be very important since it had been discovered during this year's season that the main body of the fank appeared to be constructed inside the subsurface remains of an earlier building.

Although we have maintained that the Annat site, in its later phases, is an early 7th-8th century AD monastic enclave of the Celtic Christian mission to the Western Isles from Ireland, the proof of this claim has been elusive. If it is such an early Christian monastic site then one would expect a chapel to be built within the enclosure somewhere and commonly the huts would face this chapel. The excavated hut and its adjacent twin both have entrances with a line of sight to the east, converging at the location of the sheep fank. Therefore it is the obvious location for the chapel.

The stone rubble and rubbish was removed from the sheep dip revealing very crudely constructed side walls and several slabs lain to form a rough floor. The east end where the enclosure wall should have been encountered was unstable and it was not fully excavated since much more time would be required to excavate further with safety. The same situation was encountered at the western end, but it was enough to be able to see that there did appear to be an earlier construction with some depth, however it

would not have been good practice to meddle with any contexts by approaching them vertically. Also to remove even the last few loose fragments of rubble and dip floor would have been perilous while the poorly constructed drystone walling of the bank still loomed above the sunken dip.

EILEAN AN TIGHE

Any topographical survey produces many positive and negative features in the landscape, some of which appear to be associated with distinctive “site” features and some of which appear to be removed from such features. Excluding the lazy bed field system, the Lower Settlement Area has a number of each kind of category. Now that each of the “site” features have been investigated and in general placed in their functional and temporal slot it was considered appropriate to begin to verify the assumed nature of these other “non-site” features.

Site HI 5. Bothy.

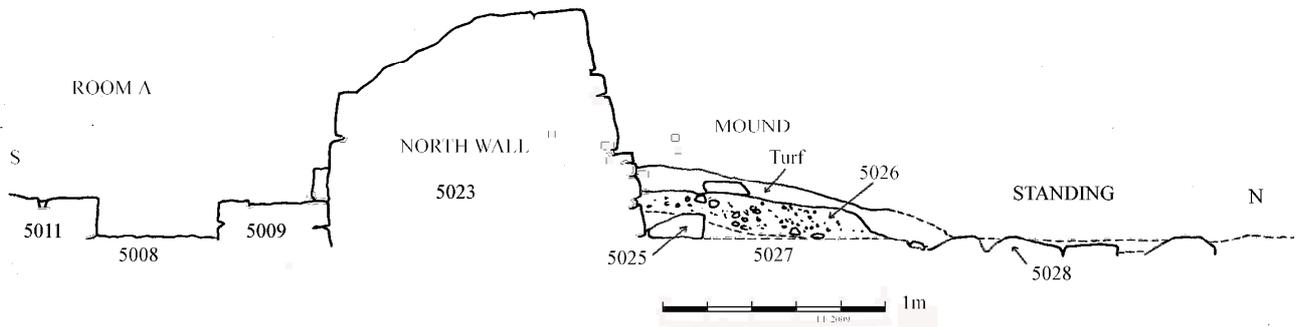
The lobstermans' bothy HI 5 has a low mound against its northern external wall, to the east of the entrance. This mound had been assumed to be the residue of a peat-stack similar to those found and excavated around the external walls of the other bothies. In previous years an arc of exposed stone blocks had been observed, which appeared to delineate and retain the northern edge of this peat-stack. To verify these assumptions a small evaluation trench was cut from south to north across the mound. This was expanded when it was found that the stone arc was in fact a much more substantial hard-standing surface.

The Mound

The evaluation trench across the mound revealed that there was no visible evidence for any relic peat-stack. Under the turf soil was a layer of loose grit/gravel (5026) in a matrix of light brown friable organic soil, which most likely derives from partially decayed dry root fibers. Below and partially mixed with the bottom of 5026 is a scattered stone blocks and beach cobbles lying within a less gritty brown peaty soil (5025). This deposit cleans-off onto a dense brown clay (5027). The interfaces between each deposit is relatively sharply defined, suggesting a possible interval between each deposition allowing for a certain amount of natural settlement and compaction.

Finds from the excavation of the mound

1 fragment of ribbed white salt glazed marmalade jar; 1 white salt glazed crockery; misc. iron/tin. All finds were returned to the excavation.



HI 5 Section through north of Room A, north wall, mound and hard standing.

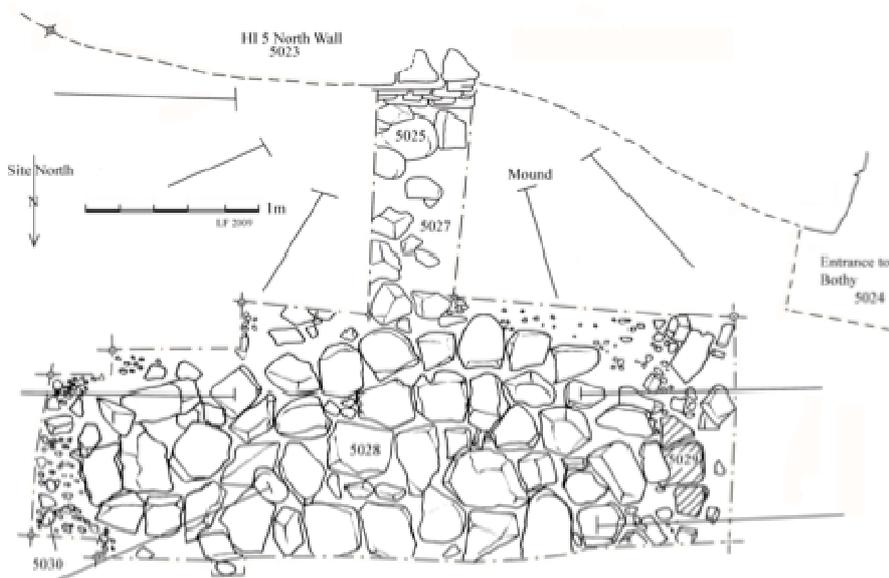
The Hard-Standing

The supposed stone retaining arc was revealed to be the stonework towards the center of an elliptical area of laid stone blocks (5028). The recently formed turf soil covering the mound had spread down over the edge of the stonework masking its true nature. The trench was expanded to reveal the full extent of this hard-standing and it was found that the majority of the stonework was covered not by soil, but by a thick, matted spread of long grass.

The lack of soil cover suggests that this structure is of a very late addition to the bothy, however the gravel (5026) recorded in the evaluation trench of the mound thinly covered the stones closest to the mound and filled some of the gaps between stones.

The hard standing is an elliptical or boat shaped feature, with an east to west axis 3,40m long and 1,40m at its widest point set 1,40m away from the north wall of the bothy and angled slightly away at the east end from being parallel with it. Both end slope gently down from the center apparently following the contour of deposits or the land surface below, possibly a continuation of the mound. The structure uses generally flat faced stones and there are only a couple of large beach cobbles. The paucity of cobbles may indicate that the stones found in the evaluation trench, which appeared to contain rather more cobbles, are not a contemporary deposit with the hard standing structure.

In uncovering a slightly larger area around the edges of the laid stone it was found that at the western end there was a lower setting of better laid slab like stone blocks (5029), on which the more blocky stones of 5028 rested. At the same level around the other edges of 5028 a beach gravel of pebbles appeared to be laid in a compacted surface. These discoveries indicate that there earlier deposits and features below the hard standing, however there is no reason to conclude that those which were revealed are any earlier than the construction of the bothy.



HI 5 Plan of hard standing 5028 and mound down to 5027

Finds from the excavation of the hard standing down to level 5030

A small number of ceramic fragments were recovered during the excavations, almost entirely of early modern factory made products.

1 Brown glazed teapot lid; 1 white glazed saucer rim; 1 sponge ware sherd decorated in purple; 1 white salt glazed sherd; 1 possible willow patterned sherd; 1 white with blue line sherd. There was 1 sherd of handmade pottery and a lump of coal. All finds except the handmade pottery were returned to the excavation.

Comment

The evaluation trench through the mound at the north wall of the bothy proved that it was not formed by the expected pile of a relic peat stack. Although the trench was not taken to the base of the bothy wall and therefore it was not observed in its entirety some possibilities can be suggested for at least the upper deposits. The gravel (5026) compares well with grit which can be scraped up from beneath the larger cobbles and pebbles on the beach and is a material that has, in recent years been used to make small quantities of concrete for building purposes. It may be that this particular deposit is the residue of some gathered grit used for making the concrete floor (5008) in the main living quarters (Room A) in front of the fireplace of the bothy.

The large cobbles and stone blocks (5025) appear to be the discarded unused stones from some building activity and if not for the hardstanding then possibly repairs to the bothies fabric.

The hard standing, although in its original form it was not set into the ground, but apparently merely placed on an earlier hard surface, it is of a substantial nature and not easily disturbed. The lack of soil cover just the merest thin layer of modern peat soil in some areas indicates that it is of comparatively recent date, possibly the last few years in the early 20th century of the bothies useful life.

The function of this platform is less easily determined. Although it is almost certainly associated with the lobstermans' hut and their activities the initial consideration that it could have been a stand for lobster creels is barely tenable since creels would not require such a structure. Also the standing would

most likely have been built against the wall and not away from it, and surely the shape would have been more rectangular.

The boat shape may be the only clue to its function. Although small boats would normally have been kept at the isthmus landing beach during the working period, tied to some of the many mooring rings that have been recorded pinioned into the cliff face, it is possible that out of season a boat was kept, upturned on this stand (or noost) over winter. The cobbles and stones (5026) in the mound may have been for securing such a boat. This would not be out of keeping with the apparent slipway down to the main bay beach to the south-west of the cottage which indicates that boats were drawn up into the settlement area at this point.

The glimpse of earlier structures and deposits around the standing reinforce the fact that there is still much to be learnt about the area.