FINLAGGAN, ISLAY – THE CENTRE OF THE LORDSHIP OF THE ISLES

PART 7 – INTERIM REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS ON EILEAN NA COMHAIRLE
TRENCHES 16, 23, 24 AND 25

Excavations on Eilean na Comhairle

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Eilean na Comhairle is circular, 25m in diameter, rising to a height of less than 3m above water level, and lies some 45m to the SW of Eilean Mor. Because it is not normally accessible it is in summer clothed with a dense crop of long grass, nettles, thistles, etc, masking the ruins of three structures on its summit. This island lies some 45m to the SW of Eilean Mor. The remains of a stone causeway connecting the two islands lie under the water. The boulders that can sometimes be seen breaking the water’s surface are stepping stones, presumably of relatively recent date. There are also two small boulder jetties on Eilean na Comhairle.

It was assumed that much of the bulk of the island results from the debris of human occupation over a long period of time, but that there might be a small natural island buried underneath. The underlying rock is Dalradian limestone and phyllite, an extension of the same ridge as forms Eilean Mor. The rock is exposed as a shallow
underwater platform extending at least 50m in a south-westerly direction beyond the smaller island, forming an area of shallow water. Here it is covered with a tail of boulders.
The perimeter of Eilean na Comhairle from the jetty on its NW edge round anti-clockwise to the jetty on its SE edge is composed of boulders and blocks of stone, some laid, some collapsed, but all the result of human activity. The remaining segment of shoreline adjacent to Eilean Mor is composed of silts and gravels. They form an apron extending under water for a distance of about 6m before slipping down more steeply into a weedy channel with a silty floor. On this apron the depth of water is normally not any more than half a metre, with the channel reaching a depth of 1.5m. The apron appears to result from two processes, the natural creation of an alluvial tail in the lee of the island, and the accumulation of midden material dumped here by the occupants in the past.

Prior to excavation it was clear that there were three man-made structures (a, b and c) on the summit of Eilean na Comhairle represented by turf covered foundations. The largest (a) has an overall size of 12m by 7.5m and appeared to have two rooms. House (b) at right angles to it is 8m by 5m, while house (c), with opposed entrances, is about 7m by 5m.
TRENCHES 16, 16E, 23 & 24

These four trenches were excavated on Eilean na Comhairle, trenches 16 and 16E in 1993, and trenches 23 and 24 in the following year. Prior to the start of work on them the island was covered with a dense growth of tall grass, nettles, thistles, etc, masking the ruins of buildings (a), (b) and (c), planned by the Royal Commission. The island was but rarely visited by humankind.

Our plan in laying out trench 16 in 1993 was to find an explanation for buildings (a) and (b) and to demonstrate whether they lay over earlier structures. As excavation progressed traces of a stone-walled castle were encountered, occasioning changes in strategy.

Trench 16 was quadrilateral in shape with sides 8.5, 10, 6 and 8.5m in length. It was positioned to take in the E half of building (a) as far its doorway, part of the adjacent yard, and the S portion of building (b). A smaller area mostly within the area excavated in 1993, was reopened in 1994 and continued as trench 16. It was about 2 by 6m, positioned to cross the E wall of the castle [16025].

Trench 16 (1994) plan.

Trench 16E was dug in 1993 to extend our knowledge of the castle. It was irregular in shape, with an area of about 8 sq m, and lay to the SE of trench 16, immediately adjacent to the NE corner of building (c).
Trenches 23 and 24 were both laid out in 1994 in the hope of defining the S and N extent of the castle. Trench 23 had an area of about 28 sq m and took in the SW corner of structure (a). Trench 24 covered the NE corner of structure (b) and was about 6 by 3.6m.

Building (a) is 10.8 by 6.7m with rounded corners and walls from about 1.3 to 1.5m thick. One entrance was excavated in its E wall and it seems clear from surface indications that it is matched by another opposite it in its W wall. On removal of the turf in trench 16, within the building, a Victorian or early 20th-century medicine
bottle was found containing a document. Unfortunately the bottle had already been broken and the ink on the paper had smudged beyond any hope of interpretation.

Trench 16E plan.

Other evidence of relatively recent activity about building (a) was soon apparent. Its walls are reduced uniformly to a height of about half a metre, and in the interior of the building, in contrast to the neighbouring yard, there is no tumble or spread of debris. The bottommost course of the walls [16002, 16003] has substantial quarry dressed blocks. The apparent cross-wall planned by the Royal Commission turned out to be a low bank [16010] of re-deposited gravelly soil, created by recent (?) shovelling of the deposits within the building and removal of tumble. This gravelly soil was found as an intact deposit [16017] in the northern end of the building. Although no lime mortar was observed in situ in the walls of building (a) it is thought that this deposit results from the disintegration of poor quality mortar after the collapse of the walls. A floor was reached in a narrow strip along the S edge of the trench with an area of burning and peat ash [16043], probably associated with a central hearth. It was sampled for archaeomagnetic dating by GeoQuest Associates and gave dates of 1230-1310, or 1420-75. The latter range is preferred on stratigraphical grounds.

Excavation in trench 23 revealed that there was a hiatus between the demolition of the castle and the erection of building (a), resulting in the formation of a topsoil [23011]. To the W of (a) is a paved area [23007], bounded by a wall [23004] running from the SW corner of (a) towards the water's edge. Evidently both wall and paving have partly disappeared as the result of erosion.
Building (b) (the Council Chamber of the Lords of the Isles?) is about 4.8 by 7.5m with clay-bonded walls about a metre thick. It is rectangular with well defined interior corners. In the NW corner of trench 16 it was noted that the adjacent walls of buildings (a) and (b) are constructed over a dump of peat ash [16042], perhaps something to do with the demolition of the underlying castle. The appearance of a doorway in (b)'s E wall is caused by the dislodgment of a substantial block of stone. No other evidence of an entrance was found within the areas in trenches 16 and 24. Prior to excavation the interior surface of (b) was 0.3m lower than (a), probably the result of Victorian clearance. In the process the floor deposits of (b) were removed and a heap of boulders and clay [16014] was piled against the S and E walls to help support them. The SW corner of (b) touches the NE corner of (a) but there is no basis for establishing whether they were erected together, or one before the other.

The yard adjacent to the two buildings is covered with a spread [16008] of mixed soil and stones, again, apparently the result of 19th-century clearance. It lies over an earlier ground surface [16015] which seals another rubble spread [16016] reflecting the destruction of buildings (a) and (b). The surface of the yard itself [16018] is composed of stones and earth, and is drained by a N-S drain [16027, 16029], stratigraphically earlier than building (b).

The make-up deposits of the yard [16018, 16051] in trenches 16 and 16E cover a hard deposit of lime mortar debris [16028, 16030], some 150mm thick. Running approximately N-S along the E edge of the yard at the break of slope is a wall [16025, 16052, 24011], about 1.8m thick, standing to a height of about quarter of a metre. It is composed of quarry dressed blocks of local stones, mostly of small size, cemented together with lime mortar. There is a ledge or scarcement along its interior edge, perhaps for supporting floor joists. At its S end it is truncated by building (c). At its N end it acts as a support for the E wall [24003] of building (b). Here it has been reduced in height to below the level of the scarcement. In trench 16 (1994) a small piece of red sandstone was encountered on the wall, presumably the remains of a window dressing or doorway at this point.

Running along the outer edge of the E wall of the castle are the remains of a clay wall or bank [16035, 16062, faced with stone, apparently of later date. It may have been to protect the wall bottom or support a path.

The return westwards of the castle wall was not located in trench 24. Instead there is a robber trench [24028] where the masonry has been dug out in antiquity, prior to the erection of (b). The continuation of this N wall of the castle can, however, be traced under the vegetation. Trench 23 was designed to find the S wall of the castle,
but failed in this objective, possibly because it has been removed or because its line is now under the water, due to robbing and erosion.

Trench 24 plan.
Another castle wall of similar appearance to the other [16021], but without the scarcement, runs at right angles under the S wall of (b) and under the floor of (a).

In trench 16E the mortar debris from the destruction of these walls seals a deposit [16031] of mixed soil and stone fragments, which included a sherd of red gritty ware, thought to date to the 13th or 14th century. A similar make-up or foundation level was encountered within building (b) [16048]. The W section of trench 16E just clipped a mortar surface [16039].

The thick layer of mortar debris [16028, 16030, 16045] encountered in trenches 16 and 16E would be consistent with a major effort at pulling down and removing the walls, and it is to be noted that the wall tops as found had mortar on them to cement the course above. There is a pad of mortar debris [16037] against the interior of the E wall of the castle which has the appearance of being a ramp for wheeling stones off the site.

In trench 23 a segment of dry-stone walling [23036, 23044] of a dun or a broch was found, stratified under deposits associated with the demolition of the castle and
midden deposits. Careful examination of the edges of the island and stonework at the water’s edge indicate that the island is substantially composed of the ruins of this structure which, on the evidence of radiocarbon dates from trench 25, cannot be any earlier in construction than the 6th century AD. The interior is now levelled up with stone debris [23040, 23043, 24027]. A stone cist like feature [23038] was partially revealed within the area enclosed by the dun wall, but not excavated. It appears to be stratigraphically later than the construction of the dun wall.

The walling identified as the remains of a castle probably belonged to a massive keep rather than a small open enclosure castle, up to 20m square, perhaps of similar date to the keep built by King Godred II of the Isles in the late 12th century. It appears to have been deliberately and systematically dismantled, perhaps because it suffered massive structural problems as a result of the pressure of its weight bearing down on the ruined dun. The walls of the latter are now cracked and lean out the way.

Building (b) has tentatively been identified as the Council Chamber mentioned in 1549 by Dean Monro, but unfortunately, evidence of its date and function seem to have been removed by unrecorded digging or clearance work. Building (a) was a simple hall, perhaps the residence in the 15th century of a keeper or custodian responsible for Finlaggan when not being occupied by the Lords of the Isles.
In 1994 limited reconnaissance work by the Scottish Trust for Underwater Archaeology demonstrated the presence of medieval midden deposits on the side of Eilean na Comhairle adjacent to Eilean Mor. In 1997 it was possible to sample these, thanks to the cooperation of the Army, particularly the Edinburgh OTC, in building a dam and pumping the water out from an area of about 80 sq m. It is estimated that the midden may have spread over a total area of about 400 sq m. Refuse probably settled here because this side of the island is sheltered. The causeway to Eilean Mor and possibly a jetty may have helped to trap it.

The midden is sealed by gravel and iron pan. From the gravel have been recovered medieval artefacts, perhaps mostly eroded from the island edge. They include two short cross pennies of the first half of the 13th century.

The midden was sampled in five adjacent metre squares (C8, C7, C6, D8, D7), a separate metre square (G4), and three small test pits or sondages on the edge of the island. It has an organic, sandy, fibrous matrix, packed with considerable quantities of animal bone, hazel nut shells and pieces of wood, including round wood, twigs and off-cuts of worked timber. Sherds of pottery, leather shoes and a broken stone mortar confirm its medieval (12th-13th century?) date.

This deposit has a maximum depth of 400mm before giving on to a layer of blocks and boulders, in which were two empty post settings. Excavation to deeper levels was limited but shows that the stones seal another organic rich deposit, similar to the upper one, but with noticeably greater quantities of wood, especially withies and pieces of peat. There is no apparent structure to this but the stubs of three birch stakes were encountered in situ. It is probable that this woodwork with the overlying stone layer represents the remains of a crannog, occupied in the 5th-6th century AD on the basis of a radiocarbon date. An earlier crannog or major building phase is represented by an underlying sequence of stone layer, midden and wood rich organic deposit, resting on the loch bottom. A radiocarbon date from a wood sample from this structure suggests it was occupied in the years either side of the birth of Christ.
Trench 25 plan.