

Excavations at Cnip, Sites 2 and 3, Lewis, 1989

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ABSTRACT

Exploratory excavations and remedial procedures were carried out in 1989 on a rich later prehistoric settlement and metalworking site in west Lewis, currently under active tidal erosion. A series of structures and occupation deposits was recorded including traces of at least two substantial buildings. Metalworking deposits were also recorded including evidence for both bronze- and iron-working. Both waste products and artefacts were recovered: the former included sheet bronze waste while the latter included iron tools and probable later prehistoric ceramics. The importance of the site lies in the association of stratified industrial and domestic deposits particularly as part of the rich archaeological landscape of the Bhaltois peninsula.

INTRODUCTION

The Bhaltois peninsula on the west coast of Lewis has been the focus of considerable archaeological activity in recent years (eg Harding & Armit 1990), notably through the work of Edinburgh University's Callanish Archaeological Research Project. Excavations and survey have been undertaken on a range of, principally, later prehistoric sites in the area (illus 1). The peninsula is a very rich archaeological landscape, described in detail elsewhere (Armit forthcoming), with evidence for a wide range of settlement sites of several periods.

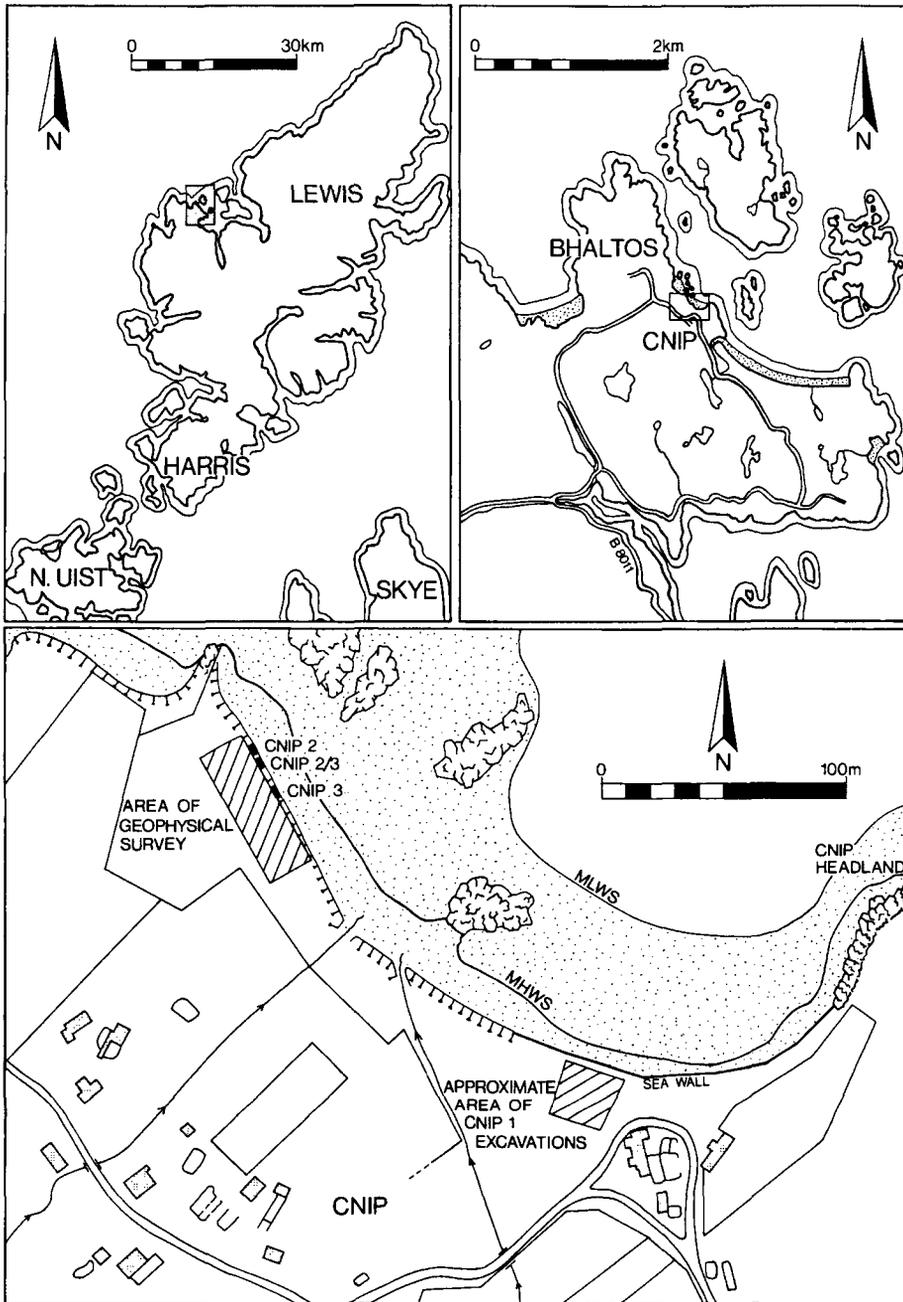
In this paper the Gaelic spelling of Bhaltois is used to accord with current road signs and forthcoming map editions. Older maps and previous archaeological work refer to the area by its previous, anglicized spelling, Valtos.

TRAIGH CNIP

Traigh Cnip, along with Traigh na Berie and Traigh Clibhe, are the three machair systems on the Bhaltois peninsula. The work described here represents a continuation of a programme of excavation and evaluation in Traigh Cnip, begun with the Cnip 1 excavations in 1988 (Armit 1988). Excavations there, in advance of the construction of a sea-wall, revealed a substantial and exceptionally well-preserved later prehistoric settlement complex, comprising two wheelhouses and several later structures (Armit 1988).

In the survey of the peninsula, including Traigh Cnip, which accompanied the excavations in autumn 1989, further erosion of the Cnip beach-front was found to have exposed two concentrations of anthropogenic soils which were associated with settlement evidence. These

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ILLUS 1 Location map. Based upon the Ordnance Survey map © Crown copyright



ILLUS 2 · Cnip Site 3

concentrations, Cnip sites 2 and 3, were situated some distance to the north-west of the original site (illus 1). The sites had been eroded in such a way that the upper levels were exposed as an almost vertical face, while the lower, more compact organic-rich layers, projected as a form of terrace. The sections at these two locations were cleaned and recorded, and the projecting terraces were partially excavated and backfilled with stones to provide temporary stability against erosion.

This evaluation exercise produced evidence of well-preserved structures, probably later prehistoric in date (illus 2), and a startling quantity of material relating to metalworking activity.

The detailed record of the stratigraphy is deposited with the site archive in the National Monuments Record of Scotland.

THE EXCAVATED DEPOSITS

CNIP SITE 2

This site (NB 0975 3665) was identified as a band of dense midden material with some stonework, situated under a substantial overburden of sand deposits which were wind-deposited and mostly sterile. The section was cleaned and a projecting terrace of less eroded deposits towards the base of the section was excavated. This terrace projected up to 0.8m from the upper sand deposits.

The excavated area contained a small stone structure of circular or oval form with a small amount of floor deposits *in situ*. Only two courses of walling were preserved and there was no indication of substantial collapse. The maximum distance between the wall faces in the excavated area was about 2.2 m but the structure was still widening as it emerged from the section; probably only a fraction of the original floor area survives.

The distance of 20 m from this structure to Site 3 indicates that it is likely to be associated with the more extensive deposits at this neighbouring site. No evidence for date was recovered except the basal sherds described below, which may be prehistoric.

CNIP SITE 3

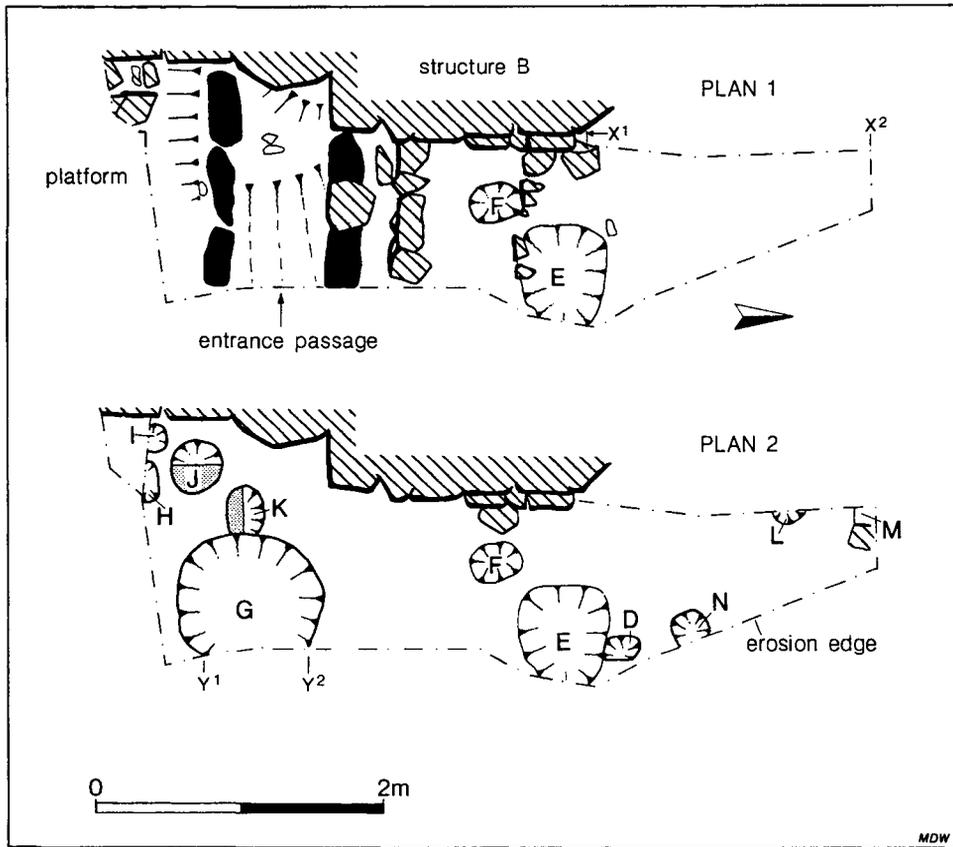
The third site (NB 0975 3663) on the Cnip beach-front was visible initially as a mass of eroded stained sand and stone. The section was cleared of disturbed material and the terrace of more compact material was revealed, projecting from the base of the section. The section was cleaned and recorded by drawing and photography and the terrace deposits excavated to natural sand: finally the site was shielded with stones and backfilled in an effort to slow the pace of erosion. The full stratigraphic report for this small but complex excavation has been deposited with the site archive in the National Monuments Record of Scotland and what follows here is a bare outline of the sequence of activity revealed by excavation.

Six principal phases of activity were discerned within the area examined. Phases 2 and 4 relate to activity that was primarily industrial while the remainder represent phases of settlement. Clearly the very small 'keyhole' provided by excavation here means that the overall activity on the site is likely to have been far more complex.

Phase 1

The earliest evidence of activity on the excavated part of the site comprises a large pit of unknown function (Pit G) and a series of four small pits which seem to be contemporary (H–K) with each other. Four other pits (D; L–N) were rendered unstratified by the erosion of upper deposits but they are probably related to Phase 1. Illustration 3, plan 2, shows the spatial relationships of these pits. It is possible that some of the early pits may have been postholes for timber structures (most likely in the case of Pit N) but no clear pattern could be discerned in the limited area exposed.

Pit G (illus 3), the large pit, differs from the others first in its size and second by being chronologically separate: this pit was cut through a layer which sealed the other pits of this early phase. Pit G was itself filled with a series of sand deposits which formed part of the Phase 2 ground



ILLUS 3 Cnip Site 3: plans

surface. There was no metalworking debris from this earliest phase of activity. The first traces of metal debris come from the upper fill of Pit G, when the pit was almost entirely filled with sand.

Phase 2

This second phase of activity appears to relate to a period when metalworking, both in bronze and iron, was being carried out on the site. It includes a series of sand deposits, many containing the debris of manufacture.

Two pits containing metalworking debris were attributable to this phase. Pit E was densely packed with iron scrap and slag which formed virtually the sole components of the matrix of the fill. Pit F had a dense concentration of scrap sheet-bronze in a stained sand matrix. This concentration was unique in the excavated area.

The only structural association with this industrial phase was a small part of a platform of small stones projecting from the south section face (illus 3). Too little was exposed for an interpretation to be made as to function.

Clearly during this period the site formed a focus for both bronze- and iron-working although the excavated deposits seem simply to represent dumps of scrap and waste. Some of the pits may

have been dug specifically for the disposal of waste products, eg Pits E and F, while the function of others is entirely unclear.

Phase 3

The pits and contemporary deposits of Phase 2 were truncated by the insertion of a revetted stone structure, Structure C, of which the entrance passage survived in the excavated area (illus 2). This was an orthostat-lined entrance leading to a structure behind the dune-face. This passage had been narrowed by a re-facing on one side (illus 3, plan 1).

The nature of Structure C cannot be gauged from its entrance passage alone although it appears to represent a sand-revetted drystone structure. The possibility that it represents a wheelhouse or cellular complex as at Cnip 1 cannot be ruled out. The revetted nature of the structure implies a pre-Norse date.

Phase 4

The abandonment of Structure C was probably followed by deliberate dismantling of the walls since no collapse was seen and the walls survived to no great height. A renewed period of industrial activity followed, which was preserved in the vertical section on site. A series of cross-cutting pits, Pits A, B and C, shared similar depositional characteristics to one another (illus 4). All were relatively shallow, although all to some extent truncated, and bowl-shaped, and all had a primary fill or lining of compact, black ash. The pits had each silted up naturally above this ash layer. Building up at the same period were a series of sand deposits which would have formed the contemporary ground surfaces. The section evidence indicates a certain amount of sand-blow and deflation during this period (illus 4).

Although the nature of the work on these deposits (section recording rather than excavation) precluded the recovery of finds, it is possible that these pits relate to a renewed period of metalworking and represent truncated bowl hearths used in some part of the metalworking process. There were no structural associations with this phase.

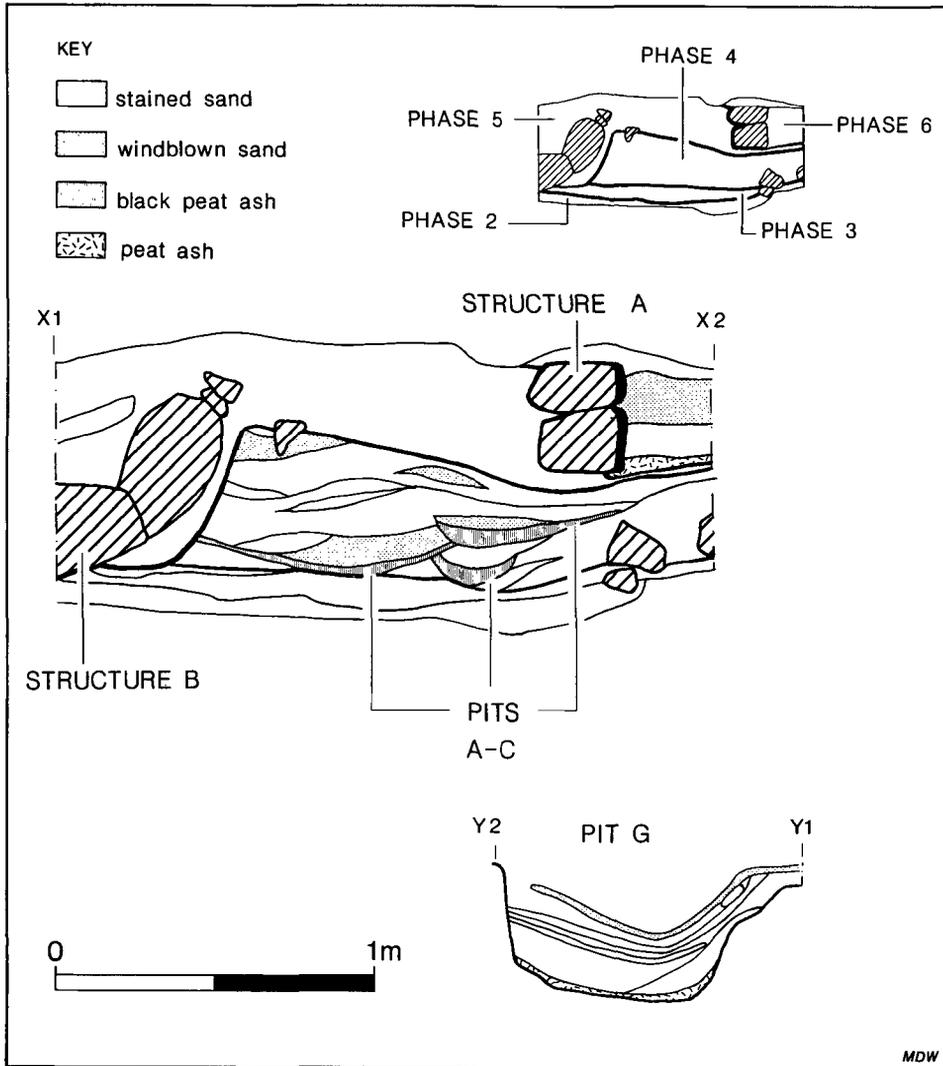
Phase 5

The Phase 4 deposits were cut through for the insertion of Structure B, a stone revetted structure of which the back of the wall was preserved in section (illus 2, 3). At first this was interpreted as a very poorly built, irregular wall, but represents simply the wall-backing of a structure of unknown form which extends inland. This indicates a high degree of survival for the deposits within this structure which stands to at least six courses. Structure B truncated the entrance passage to Structure C and appears to utilize some of the latter's walling slabs.

Since only the wall-backing was exposed there is little which can be said in terms of the interpretation of this structure. It is likely to be pre-Norse since it is constructed as a drystone revetment of the sand, but its shape and size are unknown. This structure appeared to be intact but is clearly under direct and immediate threat from tidal erosion.

Phase 6

After the abandonment of Structure B a series of sand deposits were laid down and into these was revetted Structure A. Two courses of walling, which is slight in comparison to that of



ILLUS 4 Cnip Site 3: sections

Structure B, survive in section. Only one side was visible so size and shape cannot be assessed. The walling appeared very similar to the structure described above at Site 2. A small amount of occupation debris had accumulated before Structure A was abandoned. No subsequent occupation was witnessed in the exposed areas.

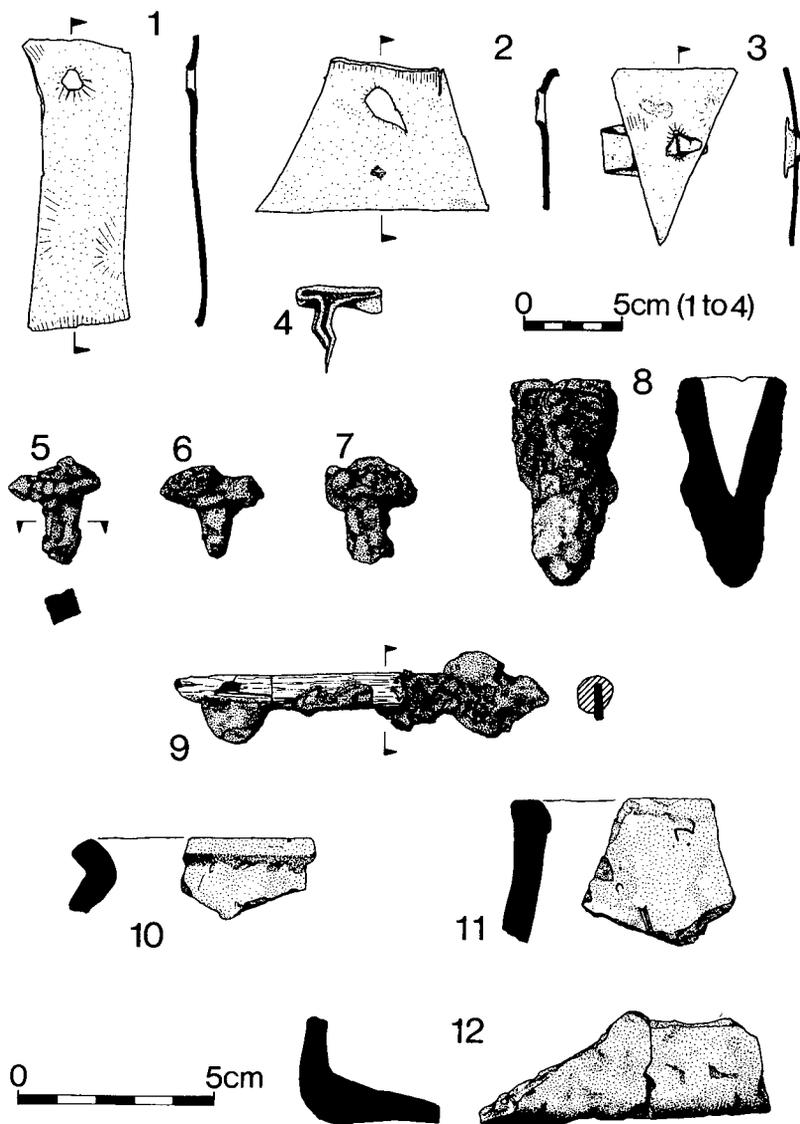
FINDS

Full catalogues of the various categories of finds are provided on fiche (1: G1-10).

CERAMICS

All of the sherds from Site 2 appear to derive from one vessel. The 14 sherds have a black, sooted exterior and a dark-brown/black interior, and are smoothed both externally and internally; the fabric is relatively well fired with medium quartz and mica inclusions. This group includes five basal sherds (illus 5, no 12) but they display no diagnostic features, other than some indications of grass impressions. The vessel appears to have been a plain cooking jar.

A more substantial assemblage was recovered from Site 3. This comprised 24 sherds, including two rims. There was no sign of substantial abrasion or rolling of sherds such as



ILLUS 5 Cnip Sites 2 & 3: pottery, copper alloy and ferrous materials

would be expected from redeposition, and the contexts of most of the assemblage seem to reflect their genuine period of use and discard. The sherds tend to be small with angular fractures and derive principally from globular-bodied, ring-built, smoothed vessels. Most were relatively well fired.

Two fabrics appear somewhat distinct from the remainder of the assemblage. These are a hard, black, well-fired series of sherds (represented by 005/02, 007/01–02, 009/01–04 and US/02–03), all with sparse inclusions. Their contexts suggest that the use of this fabric may be associated with the industrial phase of activity on the site. Sherd 005/01 is made of a distinct pock-marked fabric, which stands out as unusual in the assemblage.

Two rim sherds (illus 5, nos 10–11) were recovered in the assemblage. One of these, 019/01, was flattened and probably upright or flaring while the other, 017/01, was everted.

The assemblage is too small for meaningful comparison with other known later prehistoric assemblages. The absence of decoration, for example, may be a feature of the small sample size. The closest parallels for the everted rim, 017/01, are to be found in Iron Age assemblages prior to the mid-first millennium AD. The remainder of the assemblage would not be inconsistent with that broad dating.

FERROUS RESIDUES

Considerable quantities of ferrous material were recovered given the small size of the excavated area. This material derived from Phase 2 deposits on Site 3, including a substantial quantity in Pit E.

Artefactual material included three iron rivets (illus 5, nos 5–7), a socketed gouge (025/01, illus 5, no 8), a large wedge-shaped artefact and 71 unidentifiable pieces of corroded iron of various sizes. Quantities of slag and vitrified clay also came from the same deposits.

This iron artefactual material appears to represent scrap material awaiting reuse. The status of material in Pit E, where quantities of slag were mixed with iron objects, is not clear. What is evident, however, is that iron was being worked on the site and possibly in considerable quantities. This presents exciting possibilities should further work occur at the site.

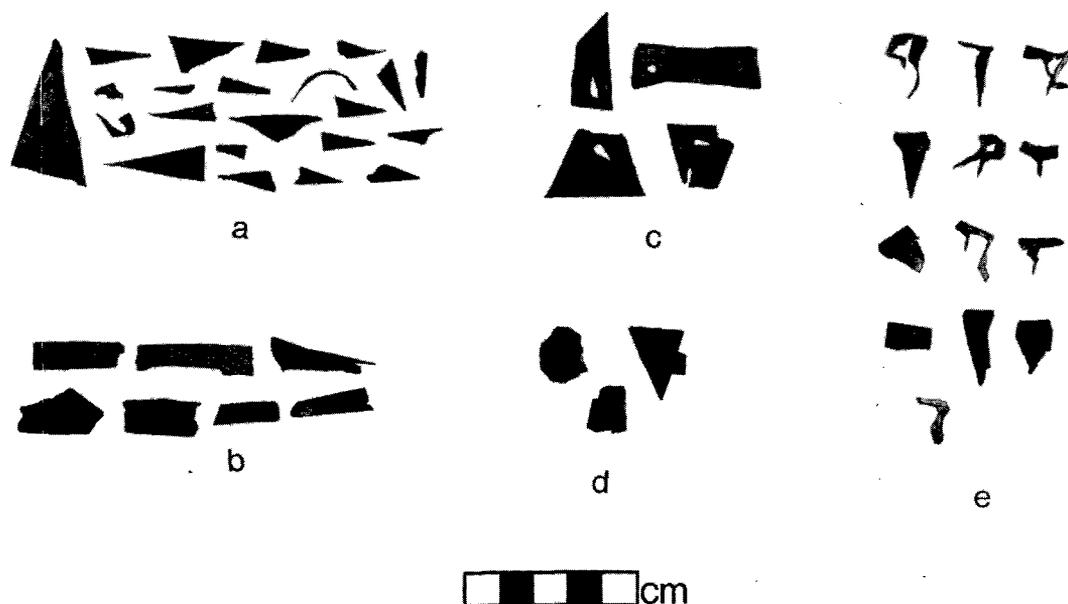
From Site 2 came a further ferrous artefact in the form of an oxidized wooden handle holding an iron blade (illus 5, no 9). This is probably the remains of a small knife.

COPPER ALLOY

One of the most significant finds on the Cnip 3 site was a small cache of sheet bronze debris found in Pit F (illus 5, nos 1–4; illus 6). This contained a variety of types comprising 131 individual small pieces. The most distinctive type were 15 ‘paper clip’ rivets (illus 5, no 4; illus 6, e) used in the repair of sheet bronze objects, including cauldrons (their use is described in detail in Burns 1969). A further three pieces consisted of ‘paper clip’ rivets piercing perforated strips of sheet bronze (illus 5, no 3; illus 6, d).

Other forms of scrap were present in some numbers, including triangular and rectangular pieces of various sizes (illus 6, a–b). Five pieces appear to have been deliberately perforated (illus 5, nos 1–2; illus 6, c).

The ‘paper clip’ rivets from Cnip 3 are identical in form to those used to patch sheet bronze cauldrons such as those found at Elvanfoot and Abercairney: further examples have been found at Culbin Sands (Burns 1969). Although Burns is cautious about applying chronological significance to these items, the connection with fine sheet bronze is clear and an Iron Age date is



ILLUS 6 Cnip Site 3: sample of copper alloy deposit

implied. Close parallels for the Cnip 3 material also come from Dun Lagaidh where waste sheet bronze was found on the floor of the 'dun' (MacKie 1976, 217–18 and Plate X). MacKie concluded that the Dun Lagaidh material indicated the presence on the site of an 'Iron Age chieftain' (MacKie 1976, 218) and whilst one might not go so far with Cnip 3, the material does strengthen the case for the site representing a later prehistoric metalworking workshop in Phase 2 at least.

The nature of the metalworking evidence on this site is of particular interest in comparison with the site of Eilean Olabhat in North Uist where excavation has revealed a small-scale metalworking workshop in one phase of the site's use (Armit 1990b). The Eilean Olabhat material implied a single-episode use of a ruined domestic structure for bronze-working over a very restricted period, perhaps only a few days or weeks. The evidence from Cnip 3, slight as it is since such a small area has been excavated, points to a more intensive use involving both bronze- and iron-working.

Although no mould, crucible or tuyère fragments were recovered, it appears that bronze-working was carried out on the site at the same period as the iron-working discussed above. The combination of these two activities further strengthens the interpretation of this phase of the site as an industrial workshop.

ANIMAL BONE AND SHELL

Both bone and shell were recovered from Cnip 2 and 3 but time and the nature of the exercise did not allow or justify their cataloguing. Survival of both materials was good and future excavations on the site might be expected to recover both in quantity.

DISCUSSION

The structures exposed at Sites 2 and 3, Cnip, appear to represent elements of a substantial area of archaeological deposits buried under the machair. The mechanism behind this machair formation appears to be the displacement of sand from the eroding and retreating shoreline, covering the landscape in antiquity. Current shoreline retreat has now exposed these anthropogenic features, originally set well back from the beach, together with the displaced sand above them. The currently eroding portion of the beach-front seems to represent the former band of later prehistoric or pre-Norse settlement, demonstrated most graphically at the wheelhouse and later complex at Cnip 1 (Armit 1988).

The dating of Sites 2 and 3 is unclear, but a later prehistoric or pre-Norse date can be inferred from the nature of the structures and the artefactual material. Site 2 appears to represent some form of occupation associated with more substantial midden accumulation. Site 3 is altogether more substantial, with evidence for at least three sand-revetted, probably domestic, structures and substantial metalworking activity. The revetted structures suggest a date for the site not later than c AD 800. The ceramic and copper-alloy material would be broadly consistent with this, the everted rim sherd and 'paper clip' rivets perhaps suggesting a date in the later centuries BC or first centuries AD.

The importance of the sites lies in several related factors:

- 1 Its context as a part of a wider, well-preserved, archaeological landscape, typical of much of the Hebrides.
- 2 Its apparently well-preserved structural sequence which could serve to augment, expand and place in context, the structural sequence at Cnip 1.
- 3 The indications of specialized industrial activities during certain phases.
- 4 The complex is under direct threat of obliteration through natural erosion.

It is perhaps the metalworking evidence which is the key element in the Cnip 2 and 3 complex. The possibility of a well-preserved specialist metalworking shop of Iron Age date surviving in this wider landscape gives the site an importance in a far wider context than the purely Atlantic Scottish.

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POSTSCRIPT

Further monitoring of the site was carried out in May 1992 as part of a project sponsored by Historic Scotland. Considerably more damage had occurred over the intervening period although stone piled up against the structures on Cnip 3 had protected the deposits to some extent. A series of midden deposits and at least one sand-revetted building were seen between Sites 2 and 3, which now appear to be elements of one complex. Geophysical survey was carried out across the machair surface adjacent to the exposed structures (illus 1). It is hoped that more work can be carried out on the site before it is entirely destroyed: current rates of erosion suggest that the visible deposits will have disappeared within a few years. The 1992 work is described in detail in the following reports:

- Armit, I forthcoming 'Archaeological survey of the Bhaltois (Valtois) peninsula'.
- Dunwell, A 1992 *Section recording and monitoring at Cnip 2/3, Lewis, May 1992*. Unpublished report, Centre for Field Archaeology / UnivEd Technologies 1992.

Copies of these reports have been deposited in the National Monuments Record of Scotland.

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