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Kisimul, Isle of Barra. Part 1: The Castle and the MacNeills

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ABSTRACT

Kisimul Castle was taken into the guardianship of Historic Scotland in 2000 and in order to inform any future works for its upkeep a programme of archaeological evaluation, building recording and historical research was undertaken in 2001. Following on from this, a detailed programme of post-excavation analysis and research was conducted in 2011–12. The archaeological works revealed frustratingly little about the construction of the castle but did identify evidence for prehistoric as well as post-medieval occupation of the site and provided an evocative picture of life on the isle and its inhabitants. This will be covered subsequently in Part 2. By contrast, the historical and architectural work presents a good case for an early 15th-century origin for the castle supporting Dunbar's (1978) earlier hypothesis and these are discussed in this Part 1.

INTRODUCTION

The interest of Kisimul Castle lies in its location on a small rocky island in Castlebay, Isle of Barra, and its possible date (Illus 1 and 2). It lies deep in the main area of the Gaelic-speaking world and as far from the centres of 'feudal' power in Scotland as any castle. This puts it into the forefront of any discussion about the nature of lordship in that region in the Middle Ages. Its cultural affinities and the reasons for its construction, as evidenced in the remaining fabric, should inform us of the nature and priorities of the chief site of one of the lesser lordships of the greater Lordship of the Isles in the medieval period.

The history of the castle is considered in some detail below but is briefly summed up here. The superiority over Barra was claimed variously by the MacDonald Lords of the Isles (until 1493), directly by the Crown (1493–1621), by the MacKenzie Lords of Tarbat (1621–*c* 1656) and thereafter, apparently, by the MacDonalds of Sleat. The stronghold seems to have been constructed by the MacNeills – who had established themselves as semi-independent lords of Barra by early in the 15th century following the break-up of the wider Lordship of Garmoran. The castle was under the control of the MacNeills from at least the late 15th century until they abandoned it in favour of Eoligarry House on Barra, early in the 18th century.

A fire in 1795 meant the castle was a ruin by the time it was sold by the MacNeills in 1837, and subsequent quarrying of the site for building materials and ships' ballast caused much damage. The castle was again acquired by the Clan Macneil (the modern spelling) in

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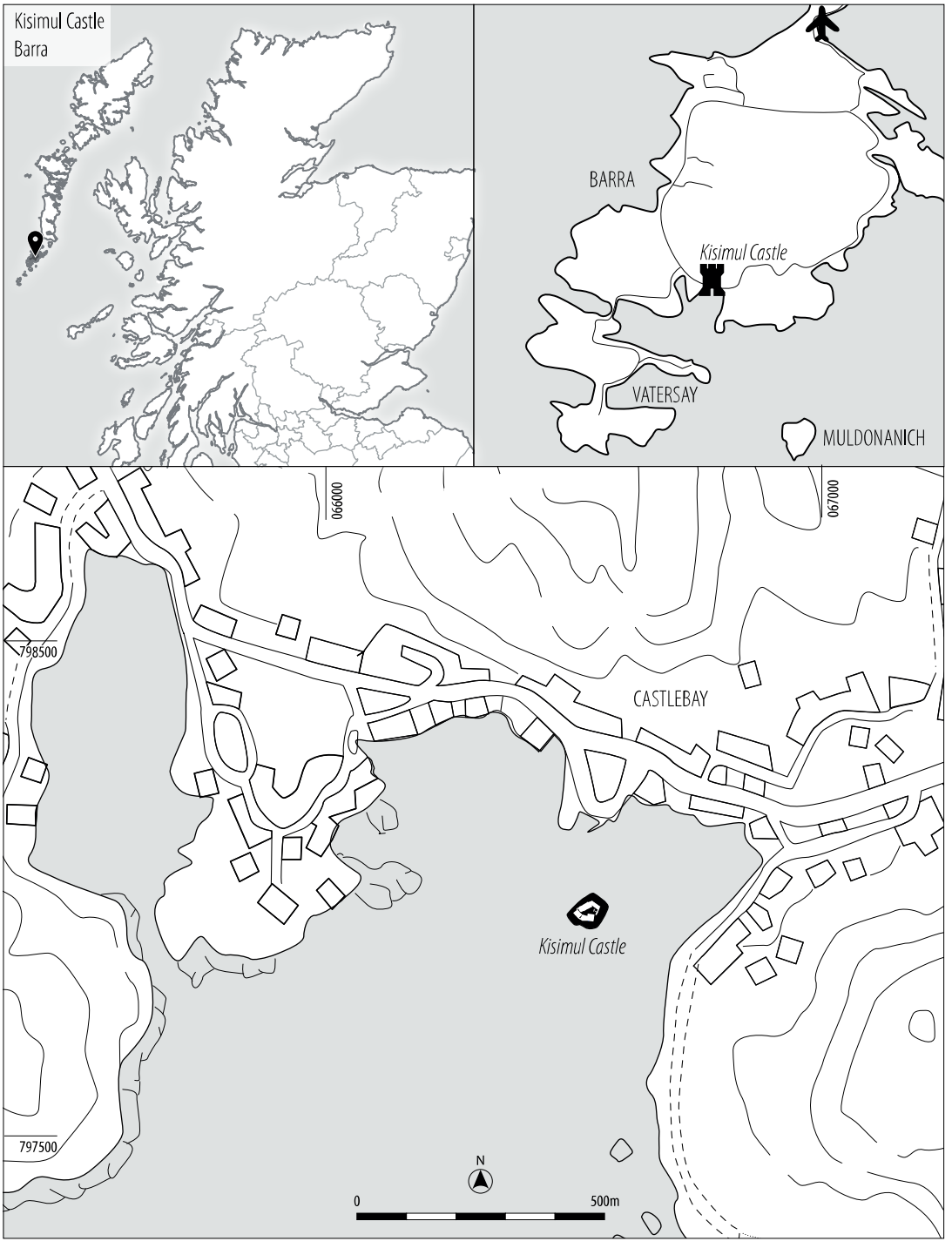


Illus 1 Site location (© OpenStreetMap contributors, http://www.openstreetmap.org/copyright)

1937 and was subsequently restored. It is now in the guardianship of Historic Environment Scotland.

THE ORIGINS OF THE CASTLE

The building of Kisimul Castle has been assigned to a variety of dates between the 11th and 15th century.[1] Overall, however, the surviving documentary evidence strongly suggests that the castle was a late medieval construction, dateable to the period *c* 1370–1549 and perhaps as late as 1427–1549. Certainly, there are a number of pieces of 'negative' evidence that indicate there was no castle on the site during the early years of the reign of Robert II (1371–90). First, Kisimul was not included in the description of the islands of Scotland incorporated in John of Fordun's *Chronica Gentis Scotorum* written between 1371 and 1387 (Fordun 1871). Scott (1979) has argued convincingly that, despite some mistakes, the description of the Western Isles provided by Fordun was largely accurate and near contemporary.[2] Second, the castle was not mentioned in a grant of the mainland territories of Garmoran and associated islands, including Barra, made by John of Islay, Lord of the Isles, in favour of John's son Ranald, despite the fact that Castle Tioram in Moidart and a fortification on Benbecula were specified (RMS i, no. 520).[3] John's charter is undated, but was confirmed by Robert II on 1 January 1373 and was probably issued shortly before that date (RMS i, nos 412, 551).[4] The first unambiguous reference to Kisimul Castle does not, in fact, occur until 1549, but, as will be argued below, the most likely period for construction was probably the 15th century. The building of the castle may well have been prompted by changes in the structure of political lordship in the region at around this time, notably the rise of the Barra-based MacNeill kindred to a new

ILLUS 2 The castle in its setting (© Crown Copyright: HES)

level of political and social influence and independence.

KISIMUL CASTLE AND THE MACNEILLS

Stephen Boardman

The exact origins of the MacNeills of Barra remain obscure, and there is no direct evidence to either support or disprove the idea that the family was resident on the island long before the opening of the 15th century (ALI nos 10, 18: 13–14, 28–9; Steer & Bannerman 1977: 127).[5] One of the earliest references, from 1427, is a grant of the island of Barra and the lands of Boisdale in Uist from Alexander of Islay, Lord of the Isles, to Gilleonan MacNeill (ALI no. 21: 34–5; RMS ii, no. 2287). From this point on, the history of Barra and the castle of Kisimul was inextricably linked with the story of Gilleonan's descendants. Significantly, perhaps, there was still no indication in the 1427 grant that there was a castle on the island.

Sellar (1971: 32) has argued cogently that the MacNeills of Barra were ultimately related to the MacNeill kindred in Knapdale, and thus also to the wider group of Cowal and Knapdale families, MacSweens, Lamonts and MacLachlans, that seemed to share a common origin.[6] Moreover, the fact that Gilleonan's father was called Ruairi has prompted the not unreasonable suggestion that the MacNeill interest in Barra might have arisen from a marriage into either the MacRuairi or MacDonald family sometime in the 14th century (MacLean-Bristol 1995: 37).[7] At any rate, the emergence of the MacNeill lords, whose territorial interests did not extend beyond Barra and South Uist, probably provided the impetus for the building of a secure base for lordship in Barra. Overall, then, a date of construction for Kisimul in the first half of the 15th century seems entirely possible.

For most of the 15th century, the position of the MacNeills of Barra as lords holding their estates from the MacDonald Lords of the Isles was relatively undisturbed. However, in 1493 John MacDonald was forfeited by the minority administration of James IV (1488–1513) and MacDonald's extensive lands and rights of lordship in the Hebrides were, theoretically, annexed to the Crown (Macdougall 1997: 100–1). Technically, the MacNeills now held Barra directly from the king. In 1495 James IV confirmed the earlier grant by Alexander, Lord of the Isles in favour of Gilleonan MacNeill, an act that regularised the position of the Barra lords as Crown tenants (RMS ii, no. 2287). However, like many other Hebridean and West Highland lords, the MacNeills of Barra enjoyed a rather fraught relationship with the Crown following the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles. In the 16th century the MacNeills were notably unresponsive to the demands of Scottish royal government and, given their relatively remote location, extremely difficult to coerce. They supported a number of attempts by members of Clan Donald to resurrect the Lordship of the Isles, in defiance of royal authority (APS ii: 255–95, 553).[8] They also developed a fearsome reputation as maritime freebooters, sailing out from Barra to conduct raids on other Hebridean islands, the Scottish mainland and the west coast of Ireland. For most of this period the family seem to have been politically and socially dependent on the MacLeans of Duart. In 1517, for example, Lachlan MacLean of Duart applied for, and obtained, remissions for himself, his kinsmen, servants, friends and part-takers including 'Gillonan Maknele of Barray', for their part in a rebellion led by Donald MacDonald of Lochalsh (ALPCA 80; RSS I, no. 2878). The same Gilleonan supported Hector MacLean of Duart's participation in a rebellion by Donald Dubh, the grandson of the last MacDonald Lord of the Isles, in 1545. On 6 February 1546, MacLean and a number of his adherents, including 'Gillewan Makneill of Barry' received remissions from the Scottish government for the 'assistance given by them to our old enemies of England in the burning of the Isles of Bute and Arran' (RSS iii, no. 1534). In 1595, Lachlan MacLean of Duart described the then MacNeill of Barra as his 'dependar', who served him in times of trouble with 300 men and also as a principal friend and partaker (CSP 1595–7: 35–6; CSP x: 612–13).

Around the middle of the 16th century, Donald Munro, the future Archdeacon of the Isles, visited

a number of Hebridean islands and later wrote an account of them. Munro's description of Barra provides the earliest documentary reference to Kisimul Castle.

> Within the south-west end of this ile, thair enteris ane salt water loch, verie narrow in the entres, and round and braid within. Into the middis of the said loch thair is ane castell in ane ile, upon ane strenthie craig callit Keselum perteining to Mcneill of Barra (Munro 1961: 73–4).

An anonymous description of the Western Isles only a few decades later than Munro's also emphasised the natural strength of the castle site.

> The Ile of Barra perteins to McNeill Barra … His principall dwelling-place thair is callit Keissadull, quhilk is ane excellent strenth, for it standis on the seaside under ane great craig, sua that the craig cummis over it, and na passage to the place but be the sea, quhairof the entrie is narrow, but that ane scheip may pass throw, and within that entres is an round heavin and defence for schippis from all tempesti (Skene 1886: 430).[9]

The strength and remoteness of the stronghold in Barra suited the raiding lifestyle that seems to have been regarded as characteristic of the MacNeill chiefs during the 16th century. In 1596, the Dean of Limerick provided a memorable description of Ruairi, the then chief of the MacNeills, in his account of the Western Isles of Scotland, prepared for Elizabeth I's administration.

> MacNeil Barra (McNeale Barroh) who was reputed the best seafaring warrior in the Islands and is most remote to the north and by west, as I take it, is a follower to MacLean and has been accustomed to invade Ulla in Connaught in Ireland, being O'Mallye's country and to prey in the sea coast of Connaught aforesaid, Thomond, Kyerye and Desmond in Ireland. Whereupon Grany ny Mallye and he invaded one another's possessions though far distant. I have heard some of MacNeil's sept have come with the Mallyes to prey Valensia, an island in McCarty More's country, with the borders adjoining (CSP xii: 206).

The Dean was not exaggerating the activity of the MacNeills, for Queen Elizabeth's officials in Ireland certainly noted galley raids by the MacNeills of Barra and the MacLeans on the west coast of Ireland in 1591 – and perhaps also 1589 – and they appear to have still been active there in 1601–2 (CSPI 1588–92: 232, 241–2, 396, 397, 400; CSPI 1597–1603: 892, 894, 945, 1024; Hayes-McCoy 1937: 142).

Ruairi MacNeill may have been 'the best seafaring warrior in the Islands', but by the late 16th century he and the other lords of the Hebrides faced a new powerful and persistent threat in the shape of James VI (1567–1603) and I (1603–25). Although King James' attitudes and policies towards the lords of the Gaelic Scotland were not entirely consistent, there is little doubt that the 1590s and the first decade of the 17th century saw fairly determined government efforts to enforce royal rights in the west and to 'civilise' the unruly inhabitants of the Hebrides. One strategy pursued by the Crown was the physical removal of the 'barbaric' native elites and their replacement by law-abiding and industrious lowlanders. In June 1598, King James gave his sanction to schemes for the plantation of lowland settlers on forfeited MacLeod estates on Lewis. For the next decade, James supported repeated, but ultimately unsuccessful, attempts by the so-called Fife Adventurers to displace the MacLeods from Lewis. Ruairi MacNeill of Barra was one of the men to feel the pressure from increased government interest and activity in the region. In 1605 he and a number of other Hebridean lords were commanded to hand over their castles and strongholds to royal officers, in order to further the king's 'interpryse of the conques of the Lewis' (RPC vii: 87).[10] It is unlikely that the MacNeills of Barra complied with the request to surrender Kisimul to the Crown, for they undoubtedly played a major role in disrupting the plantation schemes in Lewis. In the following year, MacNeill was accused, along with Neil MacLeod and the Captain of Clanranald, of massing a 'force and company of the barbarous and rebellious thevis and lymmairis of the Illis' and attacking the king's subjects in Lewis. In response to the assault on the lowland settlers, the government issued letters of 'fire and sword' to Kenneth MacKenzie of Kintail who was enjoined to kill or capture the offenders (RPC vii: 255; APS iv: 278, 279,

281).[11] MacKenzie does not appear to have been particularly successful; in 1608 MacNeill of Barra was still at large and the government seems to have reconciled itself to controlling his behaviour through his dependency on MacLean of Duart (RPC viii: 174).

In fact, the main threat to Ruairi MacNeill was not the government, but his own family. The underlying problem was rivalry between the sons of MacNeill's various romantic liaisons, and Ruairi's alleged favouring of the sons produced in his marriage with the sister of the Captain of Clanranald over those born in an earlier relationship (RPC x: 817).[12] Growing tension over who should succeed to the Barra lordship was exacerbated by the repercussions of a MacNeill raid on a merchant ship anchored off Barra. The two factions within the family tried to pin responsibility for the attack on each other and to consign their rivals to imprisonment and trial in Edinburgh (RPC viii: 409; ix: 318). Eventually, the dispute escalated into open violence centred on the castle of Kisimul itself. On 11 March 1613, Ruairi MacNeill and Gilleonan Og MacNeill his son complained to the Privy Council in Edinburgh that in the previous October while the two men were 'within thair awne house and castell of Kismule in the Yle of Barray' they were the subject of a terrifying attack. Ruairi's 'natural' sons, Gilleonan and Neil, had come to the castle with 20 men 'all bodin in feir of weir with swerdis, gantillatis, plaitslevis, bowis, darlochis, durkis, targeis, lochaber aixis, tua-handit swerdis' and other weapons. The castle was violently taken and Ruairi and his son captured and put in irons. Since then, the complaint alleged, the chief's recalcitrant sons had 'maide thame selffis maisteris and commanderis' of the castle and had stocked the fortress with victuals, powder and bullets. Neil and Gilleonan MacNeill's failure to answer the summons of the Privy Council or to release the prisoners resulted in their being declared rebels (RPC x: 6–7). How the rifts within the family were reconciled is unclear. Ruairi himself is reputed to have endured a long imprisonment until shortly before his death in *c* 1620. Neil MacNeill, probably the man who led the assault on Kisimul in 1613, succeeded him as chief (Campbell 1954). The family feud was reported on in very vague terms in a description of the island composed early in the 17th century. The account mentioned once again the castle of '"Kilsimull", on the South end in one little Illand of Craig or rock builded verie strong' (MacFarlane 1906, ii: 177–80, 529).

Neil's status within the Lordship of Barra seems to have been undermined almost as soon as he attained the chieftainship. On 21 July 1621, James VI granted a feuferme charter to Roderick MacKenzie of Coigach, the notorious 'Tutor of Kintail', giving him Barra and the surrounding islands, with the castle of 'Kiesmul', said recently to have been occupied by 'M'Kneill de Barray'. The lands granted were erected into a free barony of Barra, with the tower and manor place of 'Keismull' serving as the messuage, or legal centre, of the barony (NAS, GD 305/1/68/ nos 6 and 7; RMS viii, no. 203). A traditional tale explaining the advance of Roderick MacKenzie to superiority over Barra suggests that Ruairi MacNeill was arrested by MacKenzie sometime in the period prior to 1603, as the result of complaints by Elizabeth I to the Scottish king about MacNeill attacks on English shipping. The tale seems to conflate a number of episodes and to date the MacKenzie interest in Barra rather too early (Sinclair 1791–9). The terms of the charter of 1621 suggest that it was a relatively new grant, probably designed to bring the MacNeill family under the close supervision of the loyalist MacKenzie lords. At any rate, from 1621 the MacNeills openly acknowledged that they held Barra from Roderick MacKenzie and his heirs as superior lords (RPC, 2nd ser iii: 199, 608, 612; iv: 677).[13] In 1628, John MacKenzie of Tarbat succeeded his father as superior of Barra, to be followed in turn by his own son, George, who received possession in 1655–6 (NAS, GD 305/1/68/nos 8 and 9). At some point after 1656, the MacKenzies sold their rights in Barra, although it is not clear who purchased the superiority.[14] According to Martin Martin, writing in *c* 1695, at that point MacNeill held the island of Barra from Sir Donald MacDonald of Sleat for a small annual rent and military services, and this situation was still said to be the arrangement a century later (Martin *c* 1695; Sinclair 1791–9: 142).[15]

Despite the period of MacKenzie superiority, it is clear that the MacNeills retained actual possession of Barra and Kisimul throughout the 17th century, although technically holding the lands and castle from the MacKenzies rather than directly from the Crown. In 1679, a Catholic cleric, Father Alexander Leslie, visited the island and reported that he and his companions were

> treated right royally in various parts of the island, but particularly by the chief in his strong castle of Kismula. This is a huge building reared on a great rock and completely surrounded by the sea. Whatever member of the family is in possession of it, even though not the eldest, is regarded as chief of the whole island (MacKenzie 1936: 15).[16]

Throughout the 17th century, then, Kisimul seems to have retained its status as the principal residence of the MacNeill lords where hospitality would be offered to visitors. Martin Martin, who visited the island in *c* 1695 (Martin *c* 1695), did not find much hospitality from the castle's watchman and constable who refused him access to the stronghold in the absence of their lord. Nevertheless, despite his rather comical failure to reach the castle island, Martin's description of the castle actually provided rather more detail than earlier accounts about the fortress.

> The little island Kismul lies about a quarter of a mile from the south of this isle. It is the seat of Macneil of Barra; there is a stone wall round it two stories high, reaching the sea, and within the wall there is an old tower and a hall and other houses about it. There is a little magazine in the tower to which no stranger has access (Martin *c* 1695).

The fact that there *were* household officers such as the watchman and constable is also significant in establishing that the castle remained in active use by the MacNeill lord. However, the great castle of Kisimul was coming towards the end of its life as an aristocratic residence.

Writing the entry on Barra for the *Statistical Account of Scotland* in the 1790s, the Rev Edward MacQueen commented on the 'fort' in Castlebay

> built upon a rock, which must have formerly been almost covered with the sea. This fort is of a hexagonal form; the wall is near 30 feet high; in one of its angles is a high square tower … Within the wall are several houses, and a well dug through the middle of the rock. It has always been the residence of the Lairds of Barray, till the beginning of the present century (Sinclair 1791–9).

According to evidence presented to the Napier Commission in 1883, Kisimul was abandoned by the MacNeill proprietors before the middle of the 18th century, with the family moving to a series of new homes before settling in a new mansion house built in 1798 at Eoligarry in the north of Barra (Campbell 1936: 197, 209). This was referred to in 1840 as the 'mansion-house of Barray at Eoligarry', and it was claimed that it had been built in the lifetime of Colonel Roderick MacNeill (1763–1822) (Campbell 1936: 158). Kisimul itself fell into disuse. The roofs and floors of the abandoned castle may have been destroyed by a fire in 1795, although a fairly detailed description of the castle in 1816 by the geologist John MacCulloch, claimed that Kisimul was 'still tolerably entire' (Campbell 1936: 90–1). In 1840 the Rev Alexander Nicolson, writing for the *New Statistical Account*, noted that the castle well had been filled by local residents to prevent accidents (Campbell 1936: 157–8). By this stage, the ownership of Barra and Kisimul had passed from the MacNeills. The island had been sold in 1836–7 by the then MacNeill, or rather his trustees in bankruptcy, and been sold on to the Gordon of Cluny family (Campbell 1936: 185, 201). In around 1868, the new proprietors rented out Kisimul as a herring curing station, and allowed the crew-house/boat-house, a section of the curtain wall and the supposed chapel in the west corner of the site to be demolished and the stonework used as ship ballast (Campbell 1936: 208–9). The modern dwelling-house known as the 'Tanist House' now occupies the west corner of the castle.

A rekindling of interest in the castle as a romantic ruin prompted repairs to be carried out in the 1880s, when walls were slurried over with a thin coat of lime mortar harling (Sim 1938). The maintenance undertaken at this time is presumed to have included the installation of iron railings and a gate to bar the breach in the west section

of the curtain wall. These railings feature in a number of late 19th–20th-century photographs. Statutory protection of the castle followed in 1934, when the site was designated a Scheduled Ancient Monument by the Commissioners of His Majesty's Works and Public Buildings.

The Gordon family retained superiority over Kisimul until the death of Lady Cathcart-Gordon in 1922. In 1937 the trustees of her estate sold some 1,200 acres of Barra, including Kisimul, to R L Macneil, who began the reconstruction and renovation of the castle the following year, a process detailed in his book *Castle in the Sea* (Macneil 1964). The restoration work funded by the Clan Macneil Foundation started with urgent repairs to the curtain wall and clearance of the vast amount of soil and rubble that had accumulated in the interior. Two seasons were completed before the outbreak of war, by which time all of the debris had been cleared – apart from some 3m in the great tower – a stockpile of reclaimed masonry was made in the courtyard and all existing fireplaces, doorways and window reveals were made good. In addition, the castle entrance and approach steps were restored. Work recommenced in 1956 and the Tanist House, built from scratch in the levelled west corner of the castle, was completed as a family home for the Macneils in 1959. Roofing of the hall range followed in 1960, the refurbished building incorporating a new fireplace in the hall and a suite of rooms to provide additional accommodation for the Macneils on the first floor. The watch tower – or prison tower – was restored by 1962 and the momentum of restoration continued through the 1960s, so that by the end of the decade the chapel and great tower were roofed. Restoration of the final building to receive attention, the kitchen, was completed in 1970 (Webster 1970). The present clan chief, Ian R Macneil, passed the burden of the upkeep of the castle to the Scottish Ministers in 2000, when the castle was taken into guardianship.

KISIMUL CASTLE IN CONTEXT

Tom McNeill

It is difficult to place Kisimul Castle into a wider context with any great confidence because of

Illus 3 The castle from the north (© Crown Copyright: HES)

the uncertainty of its date, itself caused by the lack of dateable features visible in the castle fabric. The probable date of its construction lies, as Dunbar (1978: 43) suggested, in the 15th century. This coincided with the high point of Gaelic power in the Middle Ages in Scotland and Ireland. In Scotland, much of the Gaelic world was controlled by the Lord of the Isles; in Ireland it was fragmented between powers, such as the O'Neills of Cenel Eoghain or the O'Donnells of Cenel Connaill who were almost the equal of the Lords of the Isles and a range of lesser lords, such as the Maguinnesses or O'Neills of Clandeboy in eastern Ulster.

Studying castles within the Gaelic world allows us to achieve two things. As they are not just dependent on the survival of the documentary record, they allow us to expand our base of knowledge away from it. At the same time, castles move our interest away from the events surrounding the use of power towards the actual basis for it and its control. Castle studies focus on the distribution of centres of power and on how that power was both earned and maintained. A castle betrays, through the choices made in its construction, the priorities of the owner. The first of these may be visible in the weight given to military defence of the castle, which is no longer seen automatically as a structure devoted primarily to war. Here we can begin to gauge the way in which the lord both acquired or retained power, and how far he wished any military basis for the power to be proclaimed. Military features might be present as much for the message they sent, whether of real force in war or a display of the panoply of it. Similarly, power might be maintained through a regular staff of permanent officials or, less formally, involving the part-time services more of tenants and social contacts than a large household resident with the lord. The balance between the accommodation given to subsidiary members of the lord's household, as opposed to the preparations provided for entertaining others, gives us indications of the means of supporting power.

If we accept that Kisimul Castle belongs to the 15th century, then it takes its place alongside a number of castles associated with under-lords, within the Lordship of the Isles or in Gaelic Ireland. By contrast, the centres of the over-lords in both regions seem not to have been castles, and were, in some cases, open, unenclosed sites. This is not to be interpreted so much in terms of a contrast with the under-lords' need for defence as the implications of having fixed, static points of control within the landscape. Finlaggan, Aros or Ardtornish, the acknowledged centres of the Lordship of the Isles, are either enclosed by a natural feature (the lake at Finlaggan) or by more formal rather than fully defensive structures. The same lack exists in Ireland: there was an 'old castle' at the O'Neill centre at Dungannon in 1500, while the first O'Donnell castle was at Donegal, built by Hugh Roe – who died in 1505. This was not a long-standing situation. The MacDougal lords of Lorne had built Dunstaffnage and other castles in the 13th century; direct MacDonald ancestors of the Lords of the Isles had either built or continued Skipness.

Castles, and with them the detailed control of land, were built by the lesser lords in Ireland and the under-lords in Ireland and the Isles. This was a new departure, for the earlier Gaelic castles belonged to their superiors. The 15th century saw castles built in the Lordship by MacLeans on Mull or Campbells in Lorn, while in Ireland MacSweeneys under the O'Donnells or O'Cahans under the O'Neills did likewise; the MacDonalds of Dunivaig and the Glens built in both Ulster and the Isles. In doing so these lords ensured that their grip on their lands was stronger than it had been before, and this may have played a part in the contrast in Ireland between the stability of succession among the under-lords and the instability among the over-lords. Their means of control is reflected in the siting of their castles; frequently associated with landing places from the sea, yet close to good land. In the case of the MacDonalds of Dunivaig and the Glens, whose lands were most fragmented, the castles are all within a day's sail of each other, binding together their lands in Islay, Kintyre and Ulster.

Kisimul reflects all these trends. It occupies a site on the island astride the approach to the best harbour on Barra. This might seem to imply that defence was a dominant part of the choice of the site; that the castle could act as a

ILLUS 4 The castle from the south-east (© Crown Copyright: HES)

ILLUS 5 The castle from the north-east (© Crown Copyright: HES)

point of last resort or bolt-hole. However, this is denied by the low-key approach to the gate in the first period of the castle. The internal accommodation also reflects the same priorities as the others. It is dominated by a tower like all the others. This is not accidental: from the beginning of castle building, towers were seen as the clearest statement of lordship. In other castles, the tower acts like the majority of the great towers ('keeps') of the 12th century, built around the hall as the principal public building of the castle. At Kisimul, however, the tower must be interpreted as a private residential, or chamber, tower for The MacNeill. As such it belongs with castles like Breachacha (as pointed out by Dunbar 1978: 41), Dunollie or Doe castle of the MacSweeneys. At Kisimul, unlike these last two, we may identify a hall, which relates it to the workings and entertainment of a larger household and invited community.

The real interest of Kisimul lies in its position as the main centre of an under-lordship of the main Lordship of the Isles. From its pretensions and its functional priorities we can start to understand the difference between the way power was wielded by the lesser lineages – such as the MacNeills – as opposed to the great lords of the Gaelic world. Their closeness to the levers of power explains their strength. It is no coincidence that the fall of the Lordship of the Isles in the 1490s (Macdougall 1997: 100–1) was accomplished by the Scottish Crown fomenting rebellion among the under-lords. Nor is it surprising that these last survived the fall of the Lordship to continue to wield power semi-independently of the Crown until 1745 and its aftermath.

BUILDING DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION

Martin Brann, Tom McNeill and Jenni Morrison

The site of the castle on a small coastal island, the irregular plan and the rounded corners of the curtain wall (Illus 3–6) have made Kisimul a candidate for comparison with Dunstaffnage, Mingary and other early, simple enclosure castles of the region. However, at Kisimul the curtain wall demonstrably post-dates the great tower. None of the other early enclosure castles of the region has such a tower as a primary feature. Given the paucity of datable architectural detail at Kisimul, the seemingly conflicting evidence has allowed more than one perceived wisdom, with dates suggested for its foundation varying from the 12th to the 15th centuries.

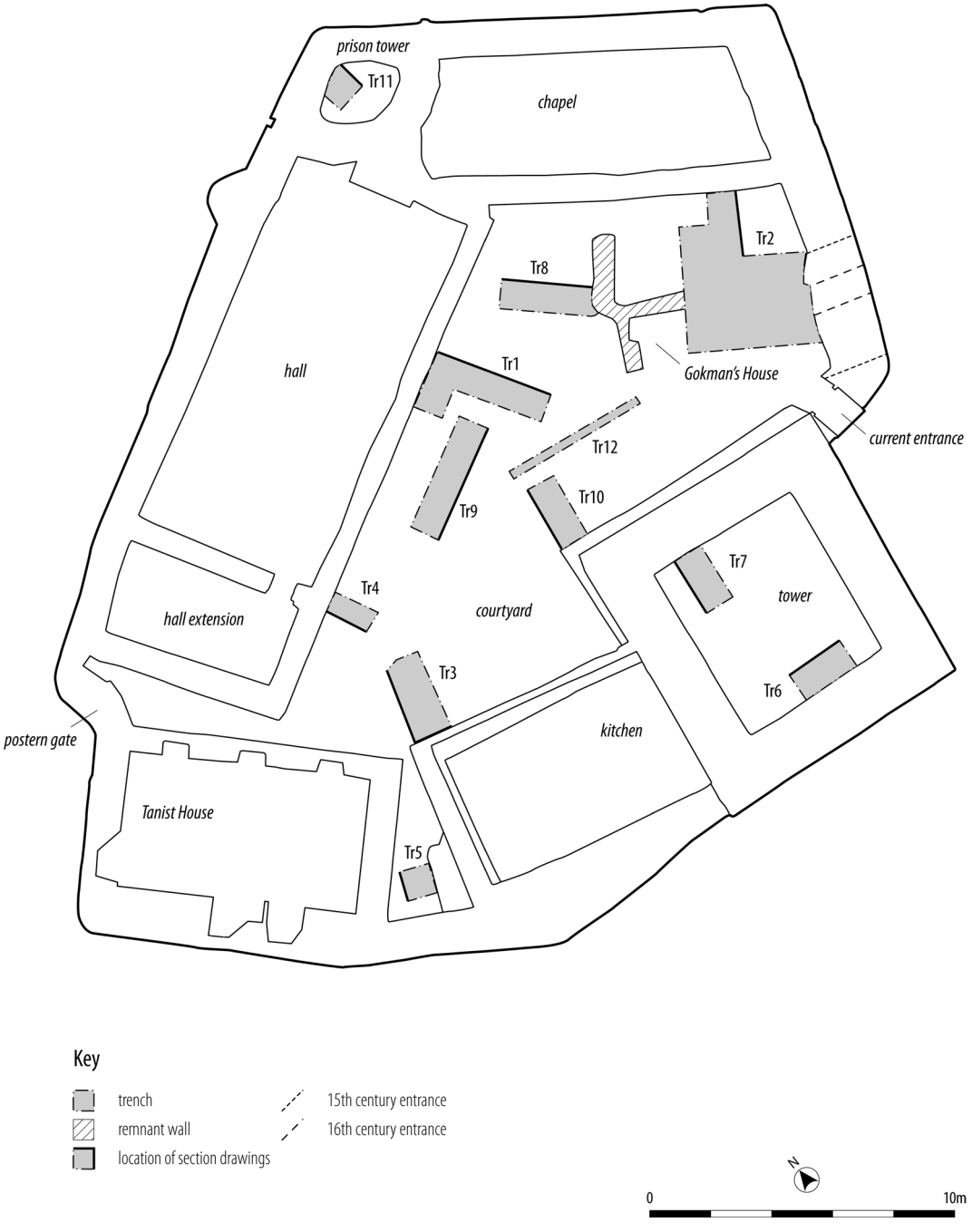
The most modern and thorough survey and analysis of Kisimul Castle was carried out by RCAHMS and inevitably any discussion of the castle must be more or less of a commentary on John Dunbar's resulting article (1978). The survey and the basic sequence which he outlined have, not surprisingly, stood up very well to detailed scrutiny. Equally unsurprising, there are areas which require further investigation or comment; in part this is because castle studies have changed in their emphasis since his article appeared. It would be fair to say that a military agenda was assumed to be the main purpose of castle building in the 1970s, where now we would see it much more in terms of an expression of power and control of land, through display and social activity rather than just in military power.

The order and format of the text below mirrors Dunbar's report for ease of cross-reference and the content necessarily replicates some of his report but with supplementary observations and a reassessment of some of the interpretations (Brann et al 2001).

THE TOWER (ILLUS 4, 7 AND 13, PHASE 1)

Dunbar analyses the tower from two standpoints. He sees it as a 'keep', the ultimate military strength and refuge of the castle, and he is concerned to understand the apparent traces of hoarding. This last reflects the legacy of Cruden (1960: 43), who identified hoarding as a diagnostic feature of 13th-century walls and thus evidence that the castle as a whole was of that date, or even earlier. The latter would now not be stressed quite so much, while the military aspects of castles, as noted above, now tend to be seen as just one of a number of functions of a castle.

The approximately square plan tower stands 16m above its footings with walls *c* 2m wide with the distinctive use of large stones face-bedded or set on edge in the wall face. The masonry is



ILLUS 6 Plan of the site showing excavated trench locations

local gneiss stone, much of it probably quarried from the rock outcrop on which the castle stands. Shell-lime mortar is used throughout, and the tower exterior has traces of two distinct layers of render. The earlier, coarser, layer may belong to its original build. The later may be attributed to documented 19th-century repairs. A similar sequence of external rendering survives on the curtain wall. A stone forestair (Illus 7) built against the north wall of the tower gives access to the ground-floor storeroom of the tower and wall parapets, and appears to belong to several phases of construction.

The principal entrance doorway to the tower is sited 6.5m above the courtyard in the north wall, between the first- and second-floor levels (Illus 7). Photographs taken prior to restoration show that the present external timber platform mimics the original arrangement and that the current cantilevered oak beams of the platform are set in the original sockets. It is assumed that a removable flying bridge linked the platform to the wall-walk to the east. The principal areas are described below.

Ground-floor chamber

This unlit storeroom was accessed from the outside by a low doorway just above the plinth on the north wall but communication to the apartment above must have been via a ceiling hatch. The current concrete floor is supported on a series of modern stone pillars rising from the ledge of an offset plinth that replicates the original timber arrangement as speculated by Dunbar, who had the benefit of seeing the tower before the modern restoration work took place. This ground-floor store-cellar would have been used as a secure store for valuable provisions – such as wine – and probably housed the 'little magazine in the tower' reported by Martin Martin in his visit in *c* 1695 (Martin *c* 1695).

Two trial trenches excavated within the base of the tower (Trenches 6–7, Illus 6) revealed a possible earth floor surface related to the use of the tower. There were no traces of a paved floor.

First-floor chamber

The chamber is accessed down a short stairway from the main entrance above. Rebates and drawbar sockets around the doorway into the chamber at the foot of the stair indicate that it opened into the stairway and was barred from that side. This would have provided temporary security against intruders entering from below, but not from the tower above. The inference is that only trusted individuals had access to the tower and that the tower housed only private chambers. The first-floor chamber is likely to have been the private apartment of a senior, trusted retainer such as the keeper of the castle.

The first-floor chamber was illuminated by two narrow loop windows in the east and west walls with broad, tall internal splays. A loft over the north half of the chamber, completely restored in new timber, would have been accessed by a ladder and was probably where the occupant of the chamber slept. In common with the second-floor chamber above, the lack of a fireplace points to the use of braziers set upon stone flags or a bed of mortar to protect the original timber floor.

ILLUS 7 The tower and curtain wall from the north-east showing the castle entrance and current arrangement of forestair and gantry that gives access to the first floor (© Crown Copyright: HES)

Second-floor chamber

This chamber is well illuminated and was undoubtedly the laird's private apartment. There would originally have been a step up into the north window embrasure as part of the access to the parapet walk, which was gained by a mural stair leading up from the east side of the window. There is a passage leading to a garderobe in the south-west corner of the tower and a restored timber half-loft over the north part of the room. This was probably where the laird slept, and must have been accessed by ladder or stair from below.

Tower parapets

The tower parapets were only accessed through the laird's apartment and this further stresses their importance as recreational as well as military features, with fine views over Castlebay. The ability to view the surrounding landscape and have access directly from the principal apartments was an important factor in the design of many medieval seigneurial residences.

The parapet walkway is surfaced with large slabs of green slate thought to come from Cock Point, Arran, although similar slate is available from a number of sources in south-west Scotland (D Dixon pers comm). The slabs overlap to create a series of drainage channels which shed water from the tower roof out through weep holes at the base of the parapet wall along all four elevations of the tower (external view Illus 4 and 7).

Dunbar points out the existence of a pointed head of a lancet loop window in the south wall, approximately 0.18m across, built into the parapet wall. The provenance of this architectural fragment, which appears to be of sandstone and probably of 13th-century date, is unknown but if nothing else, it would seem to rule out a 12th-century date for the tower.

The parapet wall, originally 1.8m above the wall-walk but rising higher in the north-east above the stair cap house, was subsequently raised in height by about 1m and the arrangement of the wall-walks correspondingly changed. A small garderobe serving the wall-walk is sited at the south-west corner and there is a projecting machicolation above the main entrance to the tower.

On the south side of the tower the rendering completely disguises the positions of any blocked openings, but two putlog holes pierce the upper parapet wall at the level of an internal offset. These putlog holes and ledge could be interpreted as part of a raised, internal timber walkway with hoarding on the north side of the tower.

The east parapet wall of the tower, like that on the south side, remains heavily rendered. Two rectangular openings through the parapet wall overlook the boat-landing and the later castle entrance. Rendering now obscures another higher embrasure to the south, mentioned by Dunbar and visible on pre-restoration photographs. The base of the centrally sited opening also appears to have been raised in the course of restoration work, strongly suggesting the remodelling of an earlier embrasure in this position. Three holes through the masonry of the parapet wall at the base of the northern embrasure are either putlogs for timbers supporting a small external hoarding or shot holes. The internal ledge approximately 1.3m above the parapet walkway may have supported a later raised timber walkway, and the two openings have the appearance of access points to an external hoarding.

The issue of whether or not the tower supported external hoardings is an important one and unfortunately the heavy rendering and the consolidation of the unstable wallhead in the 20th century masks much of the evidence. Some features are very suggestive while others can be explained in different ways. When compared to towers where it is known that there were external hoardings, such as Threave Castle and Hermitage Castle, the evidence at Kisimul is not conclusive but one possible interpretation is presented below (Illus 14).

Whether the raised timber walkways speculated by Dunbar (on the basis of the evidence outlined above) along the east and south sides of the tower existed or not is debatable. What does seem probable is the purpose of the raising of the parapet wall was to afford greater protection for the pyramidal roof against the wind.

Discussion of the tower

Rather than having a strongly military role, the great tower at Kisimul is better seen as a good

example of social engineering. It provided a secure and guarded storeroom for bulky valuables; the ground-floor access, uncontrolled from other floors, was a glaring weakness, particularly when it gave access to a room with a wooden ceiling, just crying out to be burned. The first-floor room was clearly more important and was reached from the main entrance to the tower, but with its uncontrolled stair it was also a military weakness. Finally, the only access to the fighting platform of the tower wall-walk was from a stair accessed through the main chamber of the tower; the impact of sentry changes, for example, on the daily life of the man occupying it would have been considerable. Socially, however, there is a logic to the planning. The two main chambers appear as separate lodgings rather than the upper and lower chambers of a single suite. The first-floor one is clearly inferior, yet controls access to the stores; this must have been occupied by a trusted official or member of the lord's immediate family. The second-floor chamber was the principal one, but it is small and reached only from a rather undistinguished stair. This was not a great chamber of state but rather a chamber for private business and life, presumably of the lord. From it he could have access to the wall-walk and possibly to an attic chamber.

The private nature of the Kisimul tower is seen in the contrast, drawn by Dunbar, between it and some of the greater towers of the West Highlands, in particular Duart or Dunvegan. The towers at these castles are not only larger but designed for a different purpose. Although they have ground-floor entries, the main entrance was clearly at first-floor level and is marked by a lobby or indirect approach. The door then led into a large, rectangular single space, in the case of Duart equipped with a fireplace as well as good windows; above it were further levels. The first floor is reasonably to be identified as the castle hall – or at the very least a large and public room – with direct access from the outside controlled socially if not militarily. This Kisimul conspicuously lacks. The entrance has no real interior lobby for control and the access to either chamber (first- or second-floor) was via narrow stairs, again with little opportunity for control. The deduction must be that if anyone was invited into the tower then they belonged to the intimate circle of the lord or were honoured guests; the tower was not meant for public life. In spite of this, it should be noted that the tower, while small in comparison to the towers of the castles shown in Dunbar's article, is not as small as the tower of Castle Sinclair on Barra, or the towers of two MacDonald castles in Co Antrim, Dunseverick and Kinbane.

The interpretation of the tower as a chamber tower shows the importance of the question of the presence of an original hall in the complex, which would give the lord a classic form of castle: enclosure with hall and chamber tower. This cannot be used to signify date for it is clear that by the end of the 12th century the great towers of castles were much more (or less) than the traditional form of 'keep', where the

ILLUS 8 Straight butt joint between castle and curtain wall suggesting the curtain to be the secondary structure (Macneil Collection 1960s, S153, © Crown Copyright: HES)

ILLUS 9 Areas of the west wall exposed during the reconstruction of the hall (Macneil Collection 1960s, S434, © Crown Copyright: HES)

ILLUS 10 Area of wall exposed during the reconstruction of the chapel (Macneil Collection 1960s, S240, © Crown Copyright: HES)

tower contained the complete core of the castle. Dover, Hedingham, Rising or Norwich are best seen as providing purely the public rooms of the castle, with perhaps accommodation for officials, but not the lord. By contrast, the towers of Conisborough or Carrickfergus were built to provide the private suite for the lord, with the hall detached in the courtyard. The same is to be seen in at least some tower houses of the 15th century in Scotland and perhaps Ireland. That said, the presence of a tower is a constant theme of the later castles of the West Highlands and Ireland – the Gaelic-speaking world – during the later Middle Ages: earlier castles of the region, Dunstaffnage, Mingary or Sween were built without them.

CURTAIN WALL

As Dunbar states, the curtain wall is of similar build to the tower and at both points where it meets the tower there are straight butt joints, suggesting the curtain wall to be the secondary structure (Illus 8). It is not, however, envisaged that the tower stood on the rock in isolation but that the curtain wall must have been planned from the outset (Illus 13, Phase 1). The masonry build of the curtain wall is identical to that of the tower with the main difference being the absence of an external batter along most of the length of the curtain wall. The batter is present only on the seaward south side where it butts the southern corner of the tower and where better defence against the waves would have been required.

Original parapets (Illus 13, Phase 1)

The curtain wall initially appears to have been approximately 3.4m–4.0m high above the present level of the courtyard with a *c* 1.6m high parapet wall pierced by embrasures. The original arrangement of wall-walks and parapets are now mostly obscured by later alterations and rendering, but traces of what are thought to be blocked embrasures have been identified.

Horizontal lines of holes are still evident in the curtain wall exterior, particularly where it forms the north side of the hall range. While these have been interpreted as weep holes draining the original wall-walk, these would probably only be functional if the roofs of the internal buildings also drained on to the wall-walk.

In the interior of the building now restored as a chapel, the exposed, rebuilt, wall head is presumed to be at roughly the level of the original parapet walkway, 3.4m above the concrete floor. Two blocked openings visible above the walkway level on the south-east interior elevation of the chapel and also on the exterior of the curtain wall probably represent embrasures or openings into an external hoarding. They measure 0.6m wide and are spaced *c* 2.5m apart. A third blocked early embrasure is also apparent in the exterior face of the curtain wall directly below the later machicolation above the postern gate. The absence of rendering above the postern gate makes the embrasure there the most obvious, and illustrates the degree to which the rendering surviving elsewhere masks structural information.

Along the north section of the curtain wall, where it forms one side of the hall range, the level of the original parapet wall-walk is likely to have been a little above the line of 'weep holes' visible externally and, judging from the height of the blocked embrasure, the early parapet wall would have stood 1.5m–1.6m above the walkway.

To the south of the postern gate, the curtain wall has been completely rebuilt as part of the modern Tanist House, and to the east of the Tanist House the interior face of the curtain wall is largely masked by the restored kitchen building. Externally, the modern restoration work included substantial refacing of this section of the curtain wall.

Original entrance (Illus 13, Phases 1 and 2)

The south-east section of the curtain wall incorporated the original main entrance to the castle and was consequently thicker than the rest of the curtain wall. A number of features visible in the wall here illustrate an interesting development for the entrance. The first phase had a more grandiose and wider entrance, emphasised by it being set in a higher part of the curtain wall (Illus 7 and 13, Phase 1). The width of this structure was possibly to allow boats to be drawn up into the courtyard and externally the jambs of the first phase entrance are visible

as straight joints in the wall face *c* 3.5m apart. The north jamb can however be traced up to a height of *c* 6m; above which a segmental arch spanning the opening can be conjectured. Later it was made more defensive by being narrowed (to *c* 1.1m wide) and reinforced by a machicolation slot; simultaneously the curtain wall was also strengthened by being heightened (Illus 7 and 13, Phase 2). Finally the entrance was moved adjacent to the tower and a box machicolation added above to defend it (Illus 7 and 13, Phase 3). The evidence for this proposed sequence is outlined below.

It is very tempting to see the originally higher section of curtain wall at the entrance accommodating a wide, tall recess housing a portcullis; defending a gateway which typically would have been narrower and lower than the outer recess. Such a scheme does, however, require a platform above for winding gear and counter-weights for the portcullis so an entrance tower housing these could also be speculated. The tower would have been removed when the entrance was narrowed. Against the entrance tower theory is the existence of the northern jamb visible on the inner face, indicating that if there was an entrance tower it was not built of stone. A timber entrance tower built up against the back of the curtain wall does however remain a possibility. Excavation behind the curtain wall, in the area of the Gokman's house and in the angle between tower and curtain wall, offered the chance to resolve this.

The slot in the thickness of the wall above the entrance, the width of which is matched to the later narrow entrance, is interpreted as a machicolation slot rather than a portcullis slot. There is no evidence for a platform above it for the winding mechanism and counter-weights that a portcullis would require, although the timber entrance tower speculated above could have provided such a facility.

Heightening of the curtain wall (Illus 13, Phase 2)

As conjectured above, it seems likely that the raising of the curtain wall to the level of the present parapets was undertaken at the same time as the narrowing of the main entrance. A 16th-century date might be speculated for this overall strengthening of the castle defences. Parallels for this are cited by Dunbar at Mingary Castle, Ardnamurchan, and Breachacha Castle, Coll. At both sites, the curtain walls were raised and the new parapets accessed by raised timber walkways in a period towards the end of the 16th century. The incorporation in the raised curtain wall at Breachacha Castle of stone box-machicolations to defend the gateways mirrors the similar development at Kisimul (Turner & Dunbar 1970: 166; RCAHMS 1980).

At Kisimul, the curtain parapets were raised by 2m–2.5m, perhaps to match the height of the curtain wall at the entrance. The new parapets, pierced by the embrasures of varying size which exist today, were accessed by wall-walks of timber. These walkways were supported on horizontal timbers set in putlog holes (Illus 9 and 10) through the parapet wall, and perhaps also by vertical posts bearing on the earlier stone walkway below, in the manner conjectured for the parapet walks of the great tower. Where they have escaped subsequent infilling by rendering or other building works, horizontal alignments of these putlog holes are still visible in places in the curtain parapets. The 'weep holes' draining the present parapet walkway above the kitchen building are at about the right level to have been putlogs for an internal timber walkway, but it is also possible that they are modern.

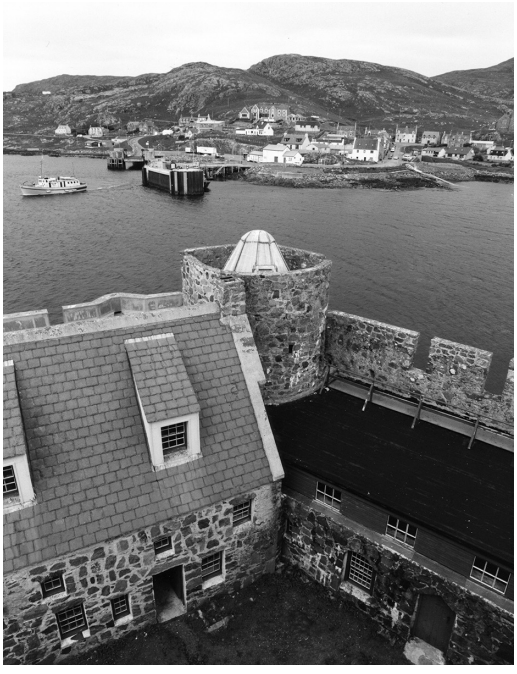
That the timbers supporting the walkway also supported an external structure seems a distinct possibility because the putlog holes run right through the wall (Illus 9 and 10). If this was the case, the only access onto an external hoarding was via the parapet embrasures. It would also have required an intricate timber structure to support an external fighting platform capable of carrying the weight of men-at-arms, missiles and the structure itself. This is discussed in more detail below.

At the east angle of the wall, the parapet wall was raised 1m higher than the adjacent curtain wall to create a raised look-out with the appearance of a mural tower (Illus 10). Two putlog holes, one only visible internally, and the other running right through the parapet wall, would have housed timbers supporting an

internal platform at this corner, raised *c* 1.3m above the timber parapet walkway. Additional protection was provided for those manning this platform by the corbelling out of the east side of the embrasure and the construction of a small internal return wall adjacent to the embrasure.

Prison tower (Illus 11)

The 2001 survey could add little to Dunbar's description and interpretation of the various elements of the prison tower, which appears to have had a storey added when the curtain wall was raised. Supplementary observations are limited to those noted from the base of the prison pit, where it is apparent that the lower half of the tower is butted against the curtain wall rather than bonded to it. This suggests that the curtain wall was completed prior to the construction of the prison pit, although the prison tower may still have been part of the original conception. Above the level of the original curtain parapet walkway the tower walls are well bonded into the curtain wall and form a convincing unitary structure.



ILLUS 11 The restored hall, chapel and prison tower (© Crown Copyright: HES)

Postern gate (Illus 3 and 6)

A narrow postern gateway was sited in the north-west of the curtain wall, but was later blocked up. Modern render masks all internal detail, save to show the blocking masonry recessed in a 1.04m wide by 1.96m high lintelled opening. Externally, a crude relieving arch is visible above a recess for a now absent lintel.

The postern was originally defended by an embrasure above. This was blocked and replaced by a projecting machicolation at the level of the raised parapet walkway. Dunbar's alternative speculation that the blocked early embrasure could in fact be an infilled chute serving the machicolation is not thought likely, the sides being unnecessarily broad for the purpose.

The date of the blocking of the postern gate is not known, although it must still have been in use when the curtain wall was raised and the machicolation built above (Illus 13, Phase 2).

THE COURTYARD BUILDINGS

Hall (Illus 6 and 11, Phase 1)

If, as restored, the hall was a single space measuring *c* 13m long by *c* 6m wide, there seems little reason to doubt its interpretation as originally a single-storey ground-floor hall, particularly in the light of the evidence for an original central hearth (see below).

There has been considerable alteration during the life of the building and in the course of its modern restoration. The present roof, floors, first-floor accommodation and the east half of the main elevation all belong to the restoration which began in 1958. However, some original detail is preserved in the curtain wall forming the north side of the building (Illus 9). Near the east end, steps lead down to a garderobe housed in a semi-circular turret projecting from the outer face of the curtain wall (Illus 3). The fact that the turret continued up the full height of the wall prompts the suspicion that it may at some stage have served as a stair turret, giving access to the parapet above. There is however no visible evidence to support this conjecture.

Farther west in the curtain wall there is a narrow loop window with a small internal splay,

thought to be the only original hall window to survive unaltered. At the west end there would probably also have been a small loop window in the original build of the hall, but this was subsequently enlarged and given a broad internal splay.

Much of the south side wall of the hall has been built anew in the course of the restoration and the precise original arrangement of entrance and windows overlooking the courtyard is unknown. How the hall originally functioned internally is also uncertain. On their own, the wide splayed windows illuminating the west end of the hall suggest that this was the upper end where the laird would have sat. If this was the case, a typical medieval hall plan would predict the entrance to be nearer the other end, more or less where it is today.

The fireplace in the east gable is modern and was not based on any evidence of an earlier mural fireplace in the hall (Macneil 1964: 71–2, 177). Excavation prior to restoration exposed an area of peat ash in the middle of a white sanded floor, indicating the original arrangement was a central hearth (Macneil 1964: 71).

When the hall was raised in height and converted into a two-storey range (possibly during the 17th century), the raised wall head on the north side was built over the original parapet walkway, but a cavity was left beside the original parapet to permit rainwater to flow down to the original weep holes (pers comm from R L Macneil to J Dunbar). This concurs with there only being two horizontal lines of holes through the north curtain wall. The lower holes are the hall roof weep holes and the upper alignment is of putlogs for the timber parapet walkway raised above the hall roof. Projecting stones on the south facing elevation of the hall, identified as tie-stones by Dunbar, indicate that the roof of the re-modelled hall and its extension was of thatch. The 2001 trial trenches produced 11 fragments of slate but all from 20th-century levelling deposits. These are all thought to derive from recent renovation work so there is no evidence for the roof coverings of any of the earlier buildings. A perishable roofing material, such as thatch or wooden shingles, is therefore suggested for all of the castle buildings.

Other features attributable to the 17th-century conversion of the hall into a two-storeyed building are the two small square windows piercing the west end of the south wall. All the other windows in the south wall are part of the modern restoration work. In the north wall, a shallow rectangular recess high up in the wall at the west end could possibly be a blocked up first-floor window dating to this period. Also in the north or curtain wall, at first-floor level, is a recess with a projecting stone at its base, which represents a slop sink or small latrine, depending on the use of this first-floor room. The room also appeared to communicate with the parapet walkway via an opening in the wall adjacent to the sink/latrine. Dunbar's interpretation that this opening perhaps led to a stair housed in the adjacent mural turret seems plausible.

The existing stone stair at the west end of the hall is modern and there is no surviving evidence to indicate where, following conversion to a two-storey range, there was communication between the upper and lower floors. The lack of any joist pockets for the first floor suggests it was supported on a system of vertical wall posts.

Hall extension (Illus 6, Phase 3)

This extension to the hall was labelled 'Marion's Extension' by R L Macneil, who attributed it to the 15th-century 'Marion of the Head's'. Dunbar's 17th-century date is preferred.

The two-storey addition was built onto the west end of the hall, probably at the same time as the conversion of the hall, and formed the service end of the range. It was entered on the ground-floor from the courtyard. Each storey consists of a single room equipped with a fireplace in the west gable wall and illuminated by windows overlooking the courtyard. The ground-floor room communicates directly with the garderobe housed in the mural tower, which would have served as the kitchen's waste chute. This garderobe tower is presumed contemporary with the curtain wall and would previously have been accessed from the courtyard. MacGibbon and Ross' (1889: 55) illustration of the castle and R L Macneil's record of the restoration demonstrate that this mural tower was almost entirely rebuilt in 1939. The modern concrete

stairs are presumed to replace original timber steps up to the first floor. Joist pockets for a timber first floor are visible just below the level of the present concrete floor.

The first-floor kitchen fireplace is smaller than the fireplace on the ground floor, presumably reflecting a slightly different function. A rectangular recess *c* 1.5m above the floor in the north wall of the upper kitchen may have served as a lamp recess and a doorway through the east wall communicated with the first-floor chamber(s) to the east. This doorway, which has a pointed head formed by two opposing lintel stones, has undergone some restoration. However, the rough lime mortar rendering of the hall's west gable appears to continue into the doorway reveal, indicating that the doorway is not a modern creation.

Pre-restoration photographs show the extension to have a crow-stepped west gable. The pictures also show that unlike the hall there was no sign of the extension ever having had an earlier roof with a steeper pitch. The extension gable spans the edge of a rock-cut water cistern accessed from the courtyard. Another cistern or well sited in the courtyard in the area of the Gokman's house has been infilled and is no longer visible. It is shown on a plan in R L Macneil's book (1964: 63, 64).

Discussion of the hall range

As discussed above, the private nature of the great tower points to the inclusion of the hall in the original conception of the castle. The inclusion in the curtain wall of the half-round projecting turret housing a latrine serving the hall range is a further indication of an intention to build the hall there from the outset. Doubt can, however, be cast by the fact that the west gable wall of the hall butts the lower portion of the curtain wall and is therefore later. A timber precursor to the stone built hall is a possibility that could be tested by excavation.

The relationships of the hall to the prison tower and hall to the chapel building have been masked by the modern restoration work and principally by the modern insertion of a fireplace at the east end of the hall. Photographs taken during the restoration building works appear to show that the curving face of the prison tower, where it is visible in the hall, is a modern rebuild.

The sequence of construction is important because it relates to the decision to build a major, permanent hall in this castle; the hall is as much a symbol of feudal lordship in itself as is the existence of a castle at all. Many of the key relationships that will be required to fully understand the sequence of events will, however, only be determined by further archaeological excavation.

The conversion of the hall into a two-storey range and its contemporary extension, probably during the 17th century, is seen as the provision of more comfortable and more private accommodation, if not for the laird then for other members of his family or household. Such a development was the norm in high-status residences in the late medieval period. The insertion of a serving hatch in the west gable of the hall demonstrates the continued use of the ground floor as a hall or dining room. The 1928 RCAHMS survey suggested the hall was subdivided by a partition wall, perhaps to provide a withdrawing room at the east end. The first floor, presumably accessed by an internal stair in addition to the stair in the extension, would have been subdivided into private chambers. The eastern first-floor chamber was provided with a latrine and had access onto the curtain parapet walk, similar facilities to the upper chamber in the tower.

Chapel (Illus 6 and 11, Phase 1)

The single-storey building up against the east section of the curtain wall was labelled as the castle chapel by R L Macneil, following the discovery of a small sandstone object that was thought to be a small font amongst the rubble in 1938 (Macneil 1964: 163). This is now installed on a pedestal within the building. The restoration of the building for use as a chapel has included the installation of a modern single pitch roof and the interior houses two modern marble graveslabs, a headstone and a number of brass memorial plaques dedicated to members of the Macneil clan. However, in the absence of any identifiable ecclesiastical features in the fabric, the original use of the building remains in

question and there is a suggestion that the castle chapel was located elsewhere. A report on Barra for the Crofters' Commission in 1883 noted that after 1868, when the castle was let as a herring-curing station, 'the chapel in the west corner was carried away piecemeal as ballast for boats and vessels' (Carmichael 1936: 265). The west corner of the castle is where the Tanist House now stands.

The present chapel building is oriented north-west/south-east and measures approximately 11m × 3.9m internally and the floor is *c* 0.55m below the courtyard (Illus 11). The curtain wall forms the east and south sides of the building and there has been extensive refacing and repointing of both wall faces. In the south wall there is a central aumbry and, just above floor level, a small recess and a couple of projecting stones, the purpose of which are not clear. The west wall is *c* 1m thick and butts the curtain wall. It is pierced by the entrance doorway, a sash window and a fixed loop window. All of these openings have been substantially rebuilt in the castle restoration. R L Macneil's photographs show that only the north-west side of the loop window splay and the bases of the two other openings survived prior to restoration. Rebuilt and repointed sections of the interior walls are clearly identifiable. The present entrance doorway into the building is believed to be the original. The sash window occupies a secondary entrance created following the construction of the Gokman's house.

At the north end of the chapel building the curving exterior face of the prison tower is exposed (Illus 11). The west wall of the chapel curves round to butt against this, although much of it has fallen away. Both the present appearance and the pre-restoration plan drawn up by RCAHMS (1928: 127) suggest that the chapel

ILLUS 12 The courtyard looking towards the restored kitchen and the Tanist house (© Crown Copyright: HES)

building post-dates the prison tower. The 1928 plan also suggests that the chapel post-dated the hall range, a fact which has been masked by the restoration work. The origin and reason for the opening fitted with a wooden grille, sited 2.2m above the floor in the north-west corner, is unknown.

The window in the east gable of the hall suggests that the chapel remained a single-storey structure, the west wall never being built higher than the level of the original curtain parapet walkway. A scarcement approximating to the level of the parapet walkway has been reinstated within the chapel. An original double-pitched roof is envisaged, although no weep holes draining this section of the walkway are still evident.

Kitchen (Illus 6 and 12, Phase 1)

The two-storey building erected against the base of the west elevation of the great tower has been labelled as the kitchen and its two fireplaces certainly make it the best candidate for this role, prior to the construction of the hall extension.

A regular and more easily roofed building plan was achieved by the construction of a straight back wall against the curving interior of the curtain wall. A double-pitched roof is envisaged from the outset with the south-facing pitch shedding water onto the original low parapet walkway, which drained via weep holes still visible on the exterior of the curtain wall. The west gable of the building is original up to the level of the eaves, but the roof, floors and most of the north wall belong to the modern restoration (Illus 13, Phase 4). This makes Dunbar's description of the kitchen particularly valuable, since the building was still ruinous at the time of his survey. He described the building thus:

> The ground floor had two separate entrance-doorways opening onto the courtyard and beyond the westernmost doorway there may be seen the remains of a slit window. Almost directly above this window there appears to have been a first-floor doorway reached from a forestair. Each storey of the kitchen was provided with a fireplace, the ground-floor one being in the south-west corner and having an extruded chimney, while the first-floor one, now somewhat restored, occupies the centre of the south wall. There is also an aumbry in the west gable at first-floor level (Dunbar 1978: 39).

The restored building has a single ground-floor entrance, the western entrance now housing a sash window. Two small rectangular windows also illuminate the ground floor. The main, north facing elevation is also pierced by two sash windows at first-floor level. The westernmost of these probably occupies the position of the original first-floor doorway. There is no surviving evidence of the forestair. The first floor is now reached via steep timber steps from the ground floor. Although much rebuilt, the ground-floor fireplace and its external chimney breast match its appearance on the 1928 RCAHMS survey plan. The depth of the fireplace suggests it may originally have been an oven. The first-floor fireplace and its chimney stack appear entirely rebuilt.

The two ground-floor entrances suggest its original partition; the eastern half serving as a pantry and/or buttery and the western half as the bakehouse. Direct communication with the courtyard from the first-floor kitchen would have expedited the serving of food to the tower and hall.

Trial Trenches 3 and 5 and two cores taken for engineering purposes indicate that the kitchen was built over a substantial layer of rubble (Morrison 2001: 11). This rubble may have been derived from the initial construction of the tower and curtain wall, and was perhaps used to level up a lower area of bedrock. Trial trenches abutting other courtyard buildings revealed a similar picture, with the buildings founded on levelling deposits rather than bedrock (Morrison 2001: 16).

Tanist House (Illus 6 and 12, Phase 4)

The Tanist House, occupying the south-west corner of the castle *enceinte*, was completely rebuilt as a private dwelling in 1957–8. Nothing is known of the earlier building, which did not survive the 19th-century quarrying of the site for ships' ballast, although it has been referred to as the castle chapel (Campbell 1936: 265).

The 1928 RCAHMS plan shows its east angle surviving. This serves to demonstrate that the present building occupies a similar footprint to the original structure, measuring approximately 7.8m × 2.5m internally (Macneil 1964: 71, 174).

Gokman's House (Illus 13, Phase 2)

Only the lowest courses of the structures labelled as the Gokman's House and its extension survive. These were exposed and consolidated during the restoration programme. The walls of the first phase were butted up against the chapel building and up against the masonry narrowing the main castle entrance, demonstrating that it post-dated the creation of a narrower castle entrance, and respected the narrow entrance. The second phase or southern extension of the Gokman's House clearly post-dates the moving of the entrance adjacent to the tower.

The squeezing in of the Gokman's house into the courtyard, up against the only stretch of curtain wall not yet built against, suggests that it was one of the latest buildings to be erected in the castle. The rounded corner of the building differentiates it from the other courtyard buildings and is reminiscent of a traditional dwelling on Barra. A single-storey building is envisaged.

The 2001 trial trenching within the Gokman's house (Trench 2) revealed a sequence of intact earth floors (Morrison 2001: 7). Slag and hammerscale indicating smithing activity was recovered from soil samples taken from two of these floor layers, suggesting that the building may have been the castle workshop rather than providing accommodation for the watchman.

BOAT-LANDING, CREW-HOUSE AND FISH TRAP (ILLUS 4)

To the south and east of the tower there is a relatively level area from where the bedrock has been quarried and boulders cleared to form a boat-landing adjacent to the castle entrance. This is sheltered by a rough breakwater of bedrock and boulders. At the far western end of the boat-landing is an upstanding fragment of wall belonging to a former two-storey building, most likely interpreted as a boat-house with crew-house above (Illus 4).

The fragment of walling, perched on an upstanding band of bedrock and large boulders, is aligned north-east/south-west. The fabric of the walling is similar to the rest of the castle. A scarcement on its east elevation for the first floor indicates that this was the internal face. A garderobe chute serving the accommodation at first-floor level is visible on the external west elevation. The original size and plan of the building is unknown and there is no surviving evidence to support Dunbar's suggestion that it abutted the south wall of the tower.

If the principal function of the building was to provide additional accommodation for the crew of the laird's galley then it was presumably built at a late date, when further building within the castle was impossible. If it did serve as a boat-house it could be conjectured that it was built once the original castle entrance had been narrowed and it was no longer possible to haul a boat up into the castle itself (Illus 13, Phase 2).

To the east of the boat-landing, a curving bank of boulders has been built up to enclose a sub-circular basin with an opening at its north end. This is interpreted as a fish trap. Similar examples are cited by John Dunbar at Castle Coeffin, Lismore, and Caisteal nan Con, Morvern.

PARALLELS WITH THE FABRIC OF OTHER LOCAL AND REGIONAL MEDIEVAL BUILDINGS

The building technique employed in the construction of Kisimul Castle, the face bedding or setting on edge of large irregular stones in the wall face with the gaps between infilled with small pinnings, is common to all of the various structural elements. Caldwell and Ruckley (2005) suggest that this is similar in style to other buildings of the period such as Aros and Ardtornish on the Sound of Mull, Breachacha on Coll and the bottom part of the tower house of Moy on Mull. The same type of fabric has also been noted by the authors at:

(a) the smallest surviving chapel at Cille-Bharra, Barra, which could be 12th century in date.
(b) Dun Mhic Leoid, Barra, a small tower probably 15th–16th century in date.

It therefore appears to be an abiding local building tradition in the medieval and post-medieval periods where this type of stone is employed. However, comparison with the walling technique employed at these sites therefore brings the refinement of the dating of Kisimul Castle no closer.

Another local site where similar stonework has been noted is Castle Calvay, South Uist. The RCAHMS inventory report recorded that 'slabs of stone are in some places bedded on edge' (RCAHMS 1928: 107). R L Macneil notes that Calvay was a MacNeill stronghold until 1601 (Macneil 1964: 90–1). Future fieldwork might usefully include an examination of Calvay, for which there is no recent published survey, to assess the extent of this constructional technique and its longevity in the castle's development, together with any other architectural parallels with Kisimul.

The limited use of green slate in the medieval St Barr's Church, the largest of the buildings at Cille-Bharra, is worthy of note because this material is also used as the paving of the parapet walkways in the tower at Kisimul.

Breachacha Castle, Coll, is another site where the local metamorphic rock was used with the same constructional technique employed at Kisimul (Turner & Dunbar 1970: 159). A number of other parallels between the two sites and the implication these have for the dating of Kisimul are discussed further below.

COMPARISON WITH BREACHACHA CASTLE, ISLE OF COLL

In the discussion at the end of his article on Kisimul, Dunbar concluded that so far as its general size and plan-form are concerned, the tower at Kisimul was most closely paralleled by that at Breachacha, Coll.

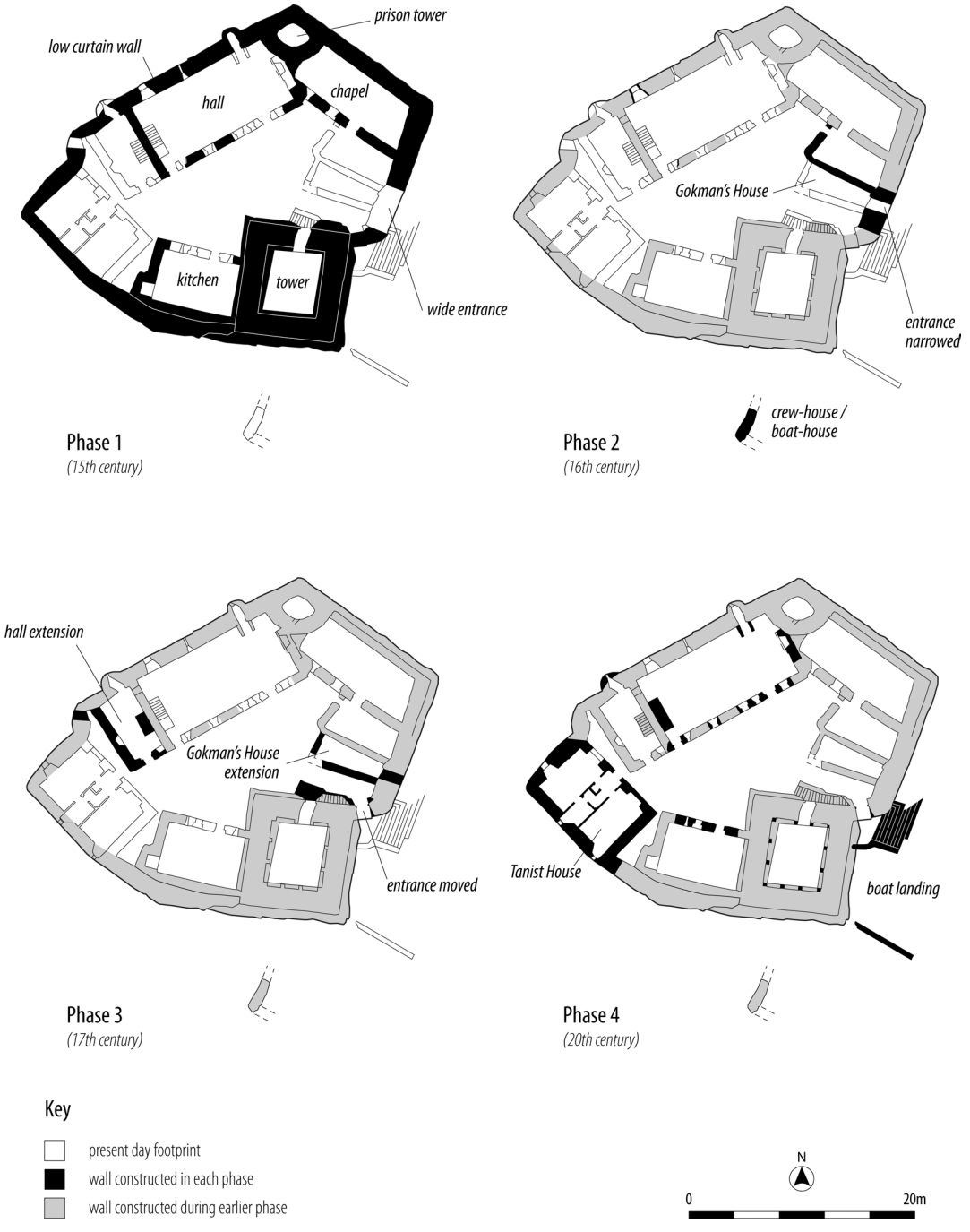
A detailed comparison of the two castles, by Turner and Dunbar (1970: 174–7) reveals a number of similarities:

- the two towers are almost identical in overall dimensions;
- both of similar build and constructed without the use of freestone dressings;
- both towers incorporate narrow mural stairs and mural chambers. Neither tower has vaults or mural fireplaces;
- each tower is the primary element of a small courtyard castle, with a compact group of buildings enclosed by a strong curtain wall, with a walkway 11ft–12ft (3.353m–3.658m) high above the court-yard, and with an angle tower diagonally opposite to the tower house;
- the curtain wall in each is apparently contemporary with the tower, but with no attempt at keying the two structures together.

These similarities strongly suggest that the two castles are contemporary and that a single designer or master mason was responsible for the initial layout and construction of both sites. However, both sites lack datable stylistic features.

The primitive character of both towers, having simple timber floors rather than stone vaults, probably has no chronological significance, and possibly has more to do with the difficulty of obtaining local supplies of flat rubble slabs suitable for barrel vaulting. Similarly, the lack of mural fireplaces, and the presumed use of braziers in the centre of the room, may just be a reflection of the pre-eminence of burning peat in the Western Isles rather than suggesting an early date.

With regard to the historical record, neither site is listed in Fordun's list of island strongholds (Fordun 1871) compiled sometime during the second half of the 14th century. Turner and Dunbar argue that Breachacha was built in the second quarter of the 15th century when the MacLeans established themselves on Coll. The apparent establishment of the MacNeills on Barra is in the same period, following from a charter granted by Alexander, Lord of the Isles, to Gilleonan MacNeill in 1427 (RMS ii, no. 2287). It is further argued that, despite occasional enmity, close connection of the two families by marriage makes the suggested employment of the same designer or master mason quite plausible.



ILLUS 13 Phase plan of the castle

SUMMARY OF ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Following the research on Kisimul Castle undertaken in 2001, the following developmental sequence and approximate dating is suggested:
15th century (Illus 13, Phase 1)

1. Tower.
2. Original low curtain wall.
3. Prison tower, hall, kitchen and chapel building (probably in that order).

16th century (Illus 13, Phase 2)

4. Curtain wall raised, castle entrance narrowed, tower parapets and prison tower raised.
5. Crew-house/boat-house.
6. Gokman's House, first phase.

17th century (Illus 13, Phase 3)

7. Castle entrance moved adjacent to tower.
8. Gokman's House extended and internal gate passage created.
9. Conversion of the hall into a two-storey building, and its extension at the west end.
10. Postern gate blocked.

Building on the area now occupied by the modern Tanist House (Illus 13, Phase 4) would probably have initially occurred early in the life of the castle, in the 15th or early 16th century.

CONCLUSION

Kisimul Castle is the castle of a chief of the lordship of the Isles set on an island remote from 'feudal' Scotland deep in the Gaelic-speaking Highlands. As such, the messages of its design and construction inform us profoundly about the ideas of lordship in the two parts of Scotland, and the British Isles. There are indications that, as originally built, this was a castle with a permanent, stone-built great hall for public ceremony and a tower reserved for more private life, the formula for the life of a medieval lord anywhere in Europe.

With regard to the date of the foundation of the castle, the only firm dating evidence provided by the fabric is the head of a lancet loop incorporated in the wall core in the original parapet of the tower. This gives a *terminus post quem* of the early 13th century for the construction of the tower as the primary building. Although it is accepted that charters were often just official recognition of the *status quo*, both negative and positive historical evidence points to the establishment of the MacNeill's control of Barra in the first half of the 15th century. Examination of the finds recovered from the 2001 trial excavations at the castle revealed nothing obviously earlier than the 15th century, and comparison with other sites, and in particular Breachacha Castle on the Isle of Coll, also supports the conclusion that the Kisimul Castle was founded in the 1400s. Part 2 (forthcoming in *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 147: 2018) will record the excavations at the site.

AN ARCHITECTURAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE EVIDENCE

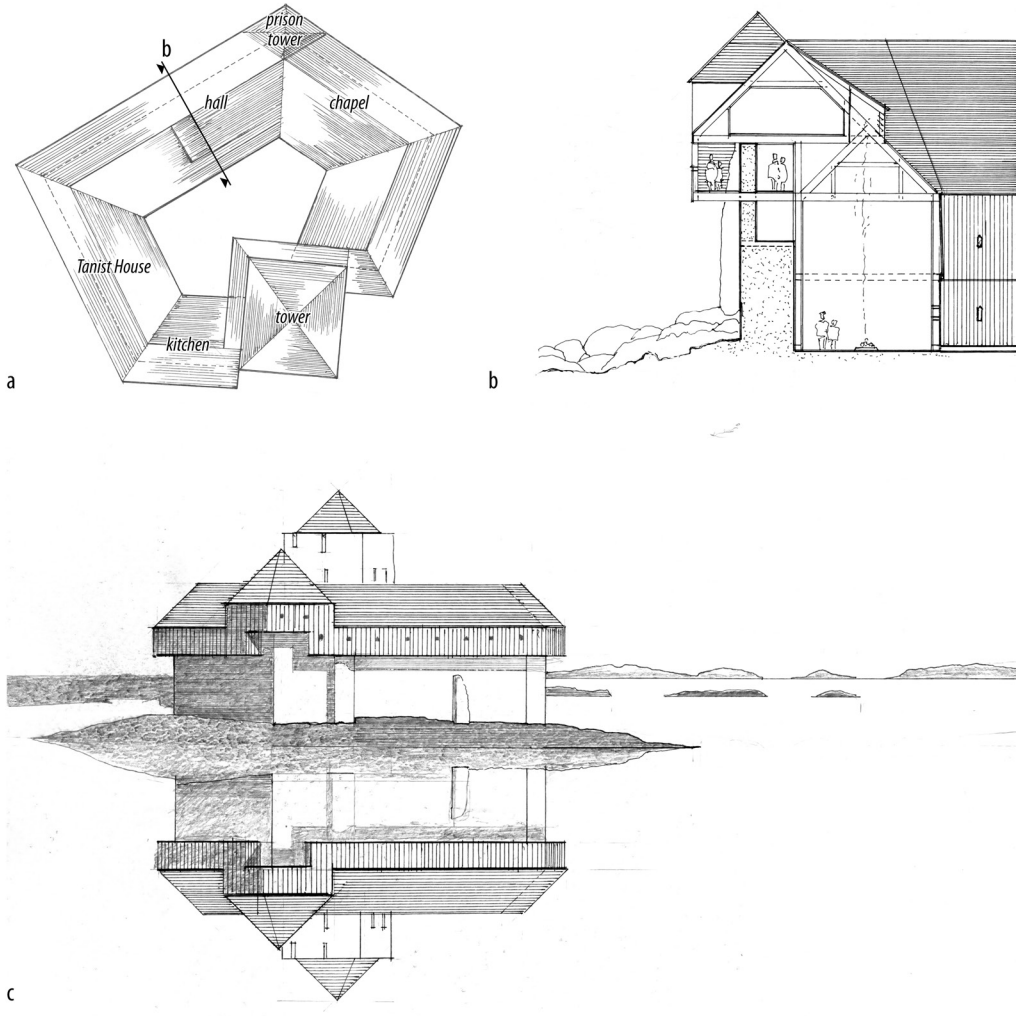
The evidence for the reconstruction drawing of Kisimul Castle are based upon four sources of evidence

1. The recent building survey.
2. The recent archaeological excavations.
3. Early photographs and documents.
4. Published surveys of the buildings.

The evidence presently available can be read in more than one way, and features that could illuminate reconstruction drawings have, over the years, been destroyed or are presently obscured. The primary aim of these notes and reconstruction sketches is, therefore, to present one possibility from an architectural perspective of the evidence and prompt discussion.

One of the most fundamental problems is whether there were ever hoardings present on the curtain wall and tower. The 2001 survey of the castle (Brann et al 2001) concluded that the evidence for external hoardings is not certain, particularly in the earliest phases. If no hoardings were present, the castle would be expected to have an open parapet walk on both tower and

curtain wall; single- or double-pitch structures of stone or timber for the hall, chapel and kitchen; possibly a wooden gatehouse and some means of accessing the first-floor entrance to the tower from both the courtyard and wall-walk. However, the absence of evidence at this stage does not necessarily mean that there were never any hoardings. Dunbar (1978) and Cruden (1960: 43), who both visited the castle prior to the latest phase of renovation work, believed external hoardings to be a possibility. Central to the argument are alignments of holes that pierce the wall in the narrower upper parts of the parapets on both the tower and curtain wall. Certainly, around the original gateway, it is possible that there was a timber gatehouse that might have accommodated a portcullis, and a drawbridge might have been accommodated in the original design.



Illus 14 Reconstruction drawings showing how the castle might have looked with hoardings in place. (Bruce Walker)
(a) Overhead view; (b) Section through the curtain wall and hall; (c) Perspective of the castle from the north

COULD THE CASTLE HAVE HAD TIMBER HOARDINGS?

Bruce Walker

Castles must fulfil the complete range of functions at the time of their erection otherwise they are useless in terms of defence. There was not a well-established building industry in the Hebrides in the 15th–16th centuries, but the MacNeills, as seafarers, must have had a well-established group of ships carpenters. It is, therefore, possible that, with the exception of the tower, many of the buildings could have been erected of timber within the low and poorly constructed stone curtain wall that had many face-bedded stones.

The most distinctive feature of the curtain wall is the large putlog holes in the upper part of the wall. These are not level with the wall-walk as would be expected if they were intended to support the sort of hoardings found in 13th-century castles; hoardings were already considered obsolete by the time Kisimul was being constructed (eg Cruden 1960: 43). This accepted, if hoardings were considered, they would be more of a decorative feature incorporated to provide exercise space for the inhabitants of the castle, where space was at a premium.

The putlog holes were designed to hold large section timbers, but their positioning in a relatively narrow part of the wall precluded any form of balanced cantilever or lightly braced structure. Rather they must have been part of a substantial structure with no tendency to bounce and lever the upper part of the wall.

The most important building abutting the curtain wall was the great hall. At the time Kisimul Castle was constructed, much of the domestic architecture of Scotland, including buildings of high status, was of timber. Both town houses and early tower houses were constructed in timber, often with stake and rice (wattle work) infill to the timber frames of the walls, finished with clay plaster internally and vertical boarding externally. A typical upper-class house would be similar to the 'Wealden' house of England (Mason 1964). None survive in Scotland as timber structures, but the Bay Horse Inn, Dysart, Fife, is typical of the layout (Walker & Ritchie 1987). When a structure of this size is placed parallel to the curtain wall, the upper beams of a two-storey structure are on a level with the putlog holes in the curtain wall. This suggests that these upper cross beams may have been continuous across the house, wall-walk, putlog holes and projected to form an external walkway. A pitched roof covering this entire structure would provide not only a much-needed exercise route around the perimeter of the castle but additional storage or accommodation (Illus 14a).

The MacNeills obviously had shipbuilding skills, but the masonry parts of the structure potentially show lack of expertise in masonry. This is illustrated by the face-bedded stones in the build, the variation in coursed and uncoursed masonry, lack of dressed stones and so on.

The existing hall is of no great age and likely to be late 17th century at the earliest. The original hall is more likely to have been the double height volume with two-storey accommodation at either end, described above (Illus 14b). This structure would be clad externally with vertical planks and lit by shots (small windows of varying shapes) at approximately head level (Walker 2006). These can be fitted with sliding shutters on the inside but normally they remain open. The roof is likely to have been shingled, since shingles can be securely pegged without danger of splitting. A roof vent protected by a catslide roof (a change in roof pitch to accommodate the opening) would allow the smoke from the fire to escape. A more efficient vent would remove any ambient heat from the hall. This was a standard specification for high-status buildings at the time of construction in Scotland, England and the rest of northern Europe.

The putlog holes are at a standard height around all the original parts of the curtain wall except for the corner opposite the tower. Here they rise by approximately a storey height giving that corner additional prominence.

The scarcement on the courtyard sides of the tower suggests that the perimeter walk may have risen to the level of the tower entrance then dropped again to the hoardings level at the present kitchen, but rebuilding in the 20th century has destroyed any evidence other than the scarcement.

WHY HAS THE ENTRANCE CHANGED SO SIGNIFICANTLY?

The entrance area has clearly changed much during the course of the development of the castle. The Gokman's House could have been constructed in place of the former gatehouse range. We must consider why this island castle originally required a wide entrance. Being on an island this was clearly not for animals or for wheeled transport. However, it would seem imperative that at least some of the clan's galleys or other boats were protected at times when they were inactive, for example, during the winter. It would seem very likely, therefore, that these were hauled into the castle courtyard for safety. The maximum size of vessel that the courtyard could have easily accommodated would have been in the order of 3m wide and 15m long, though it is conceivable that a 20m vessel could have been manoeuvred inside. These would have held perhaps 20–30 oars with one man to each (cf boat sizes in Caldwell 2015: 354). While this discounts larger galleys of the period, it does compare well with some of the smaller military vessels of 18 to 26 oars noted in historical sources (ibid: 353). Perhaps, however, rather than military might, the main concern was to protect the boat that connected the castle with Barra. This could have been a smaller vessel, though it would have had to be large enough to carry supplies back to the castle. The blocking of the large entrance may have occurred in less turbulent times, possibly about the same time that the hoardings were removed, the walls raised and the crew-/boat-house constructed outwith the curtain wall. The need for a gatehouse range in the initial scheme would seem likely. This is reinforced by the possibility that there is a portcullis slot and that there may have been a drawbridge that acted as ramp to allow the galleys to be dragged into the courtyard. All these defensive features would require height for counterbalance weights to allow the portcullis and drawbridge to be raised and lowered by a small team.

The development and sequence of the stone structures within the curtain wall is less problematic than the earlier phases and simply reflect its domestication, that is, its conversion from a fortress used by the clan to a private house used by the lord.

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NOTES

1 The argument for a date of building *c* 1030 was forcefully advanced by Macneil (1964). The validity of an early dating for the fortification received some limited support from place-name and architectural scholars eg Nicolaisen (1976: 98). The latest study of place names of Barra gives Kisimul as 'rock of the small bay', derived from Old Norse *kjóss*, meaning 'small bay' and ON *múli*, meaning 'headland', here 'sea-rock'. See Stahl (1999: 214). This derivation offers no support for the notion of the name reflecting the early existence of a castle.

2 Scott (1979) suggests a mistake by Fordun (1871) involved Barra in suggesting that the island had a cell of Trinitarian or Red Friars, which may have been a mistaken identification of the chapel of Holy Trinity in North Uist.

3 Significantly, both these fortresses were also included in Fordun's list (Fordun 1871). See Scott (1979: 6) 'Fordun's Description', for the argument that the castle of Vynwale on Uist (RMS i, no. 520) or Benwewil on Uist (Fordun's list) is Benbecula.

4 Robert II had only formally confirmed John of Islay's possession of Garmoran on 9 March 1372, although the Lord of the Isles had probably been in control of many of the territories since *c* 1346.

It seems likely that John's formal grant to his son was made between 9 March 1372 and 1 January 1373.

5 See Steer and Bannerman (1977: 127) for an explanation of the relation between the various half-brothers in the critical period. The loss of Barra and Uist may have occurred before 6 December 1410, when Donald, Lord of the Isles confirmed earlier grants made in favour of the chapel of Holy Trinity in Uist. In 1389 it had been Amy MacRuiari's son Godfrey who had acted as over-lord and confirmed the grants in favour of the chapel (ALI nos 10, 18: 13–14, 28–9).

6 Two much later pieces of evidence might support the view that the MacNeills of Barra were regarded as junior to the Cowal/Knapdale family, although neither instance is conclusive. In the 16th century, Torquil MacNeill of the Knapdale line was acknowledged by the crown as chief and principal of his Clan and surname, while in 1632, Neil MacNeill of Barra argued, admittedly under special conditions, that he was not the 'chiftane of ane clan' (RSS ii, nos 790, 4600).

7 Interestingly, a 17th-century account claims that it was Ranald's brother Godfrey, another son of Amy MacRuairi, who first gave Boisdale to the MacNeills of Barra (MacPhail 1914: 25).

8 Gilleonan MacNeill certainly supported the rebellion of Donald Dubh, the grandson of the forfeited Lord of the Isles, in 1502–7. He was also involved in Donald Dubh's later bid (1545) to resurrect the lordship.

9 Internal references (Skene 1886: 440) seem to date this account 1577 x 1595, however, this reference has more recently been identified and dated as the work of John Cunningham, 1595/96 (Caldwell 2015: 355–6).

10 Disappointingly, the name of MacNeill's castle was unknown or unintelligible to the clerk, and a gap has been left in the record.

11 In May of 1607, the king was negotiating a similar commission with the Marquis of Huntly, by which Huntly was to 'extirpat and rute oute' the Captain of Clanranald and 'als McNeill Barra, with his clan' (RPC vii: 524–5).

12 A description of the unrest in Barra was drawn up for the Privy Council in September 1613 by the Clerk of the Council, James Primrose.

13 Indeed, Neil MacNeill of Barra tried to use his reduced status to obtain exemption from the requirement that island chiefs should appear regularly before the Privy Council. In July 1633 Neil complained that this requirement was unfair since he was not 'chiftane of ane clan nor ane frehalder of his Majestie bot onelie tennent to the Laird of Tarbet', who was answerable for him.

14 The Barra writs in the Cromartie Muniments (NAS GD 305/1/68) are in a section dealing with lands sold by the family prior to the 19th century.

15 R L Macneil claimed that the superiority of the barony of Barra made its way back to the Macneil family in July 1688, when James II of Great Britain is reputed to have granted the barony to the Macneil chief (Macneil 1964: 113). The original of this grant has not been located, nor has any documentary evidence of MacDonald of Sleat superiority been unearthed.

16 This observation may have been a reflection of the dynastic troubles within the MacNeill kindred earlier in the century.

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