10 DUN ARNISTEAN

10.1 Physical description and location

Dun Arnistean (NGR: NB 4886 6266; NMRS no. NB46SE 6) is a small, inter-tidal stack lying just to the north of Traigh Dhail (Dell beach) in South Dell, on the north-west coast of Lewis (illus 1). A steep-sided and eroding gully separates the stack from the mainland, although it is accessible at low tide by traversing a rocky foreshore a few metres to the north of the gully (illus 30).

The underlying rock changes from Lewisian gneiss to metasediments of the Lewisian complex at this point (Burgess & Church 1997, 273). These vertical or steeply dipping rocks have promoted the formation of stacks and rocky outcrops such as Dun Arnistean.

The scant foundations of a possible small rectangular building lie in the lee of a rock outcrop that forms the summit of the stack. This area was partially excavated in 1970 and periodically during the early 1980s by the late Professor Murray Campbell, and several highly decorated Iron Age pottery sherds were recovered. Approximately 35 sherds were donated to the NMS, and some others to the Comunn Eachdraidh Nis. Miscellaneous stone tools and pot lids were also recorded. The excavation trench from 1970 is still visible.

Numerous sections of walling and masonry are now exposed as a consequence of natural weathering, although it is difficult to interpret the exact shape of any structures. Approximately 80 further sherds of pottery, several pebble tools including small hammerstones and rubbers, two chips of flint, and several pieces of animal bone were recovered and surveyed

Illus 30 Dun Arnistean from the east showing access route

in situ. This material lies in a series of bands across the site in relation to the eroding scars.

10.2 Erosion

Today the stack is the result of progressive erosion of weaker or softer rock between the stack and the mainland. In the past, the site would presumably have been joined to the foreshore at its closest point, and an eroding rock stack is still apparent on the landward side of the gully. It is impossible to tell when this assumed peninsula would have eroded, and whether it would have preceded any occupation of the stack.

The archaeological structures on Dun Arnistean were relatively sheltered from marine erosion, being sited to the south and east in the lee of the highest point of the stack. A rocky foreshore takes the brunt of the Atlantic swell and extends down to the sea to the north. A rock outcrop caps the top of the site, and extends as an outcropping arm to the south-west corner. The remainder of the stack is covered in grass and turf, and this is where the archaeological structures were concentrated.

There was a high level of surface erosion on the archaeologically sensitive areas of the site. This erosion covered approximately 30% of the total surface area, and took the form of linear scars, open to the south and running from west to east in a series of shallow terraces to the south-west of the stack. The worst-affected area measured *c* 12 × 4m in plan (illus 31 and 32). What appeared to be wall ends were exposed in many of these scars, and slumped walls and occupation soils (including midden material) were apparent in plan over this area of the site (illus 31). A large number of artefacts (see below and Appendices 3 and 4) were recovered from almost all these areas. There were also some eroding scars on the top of the east-facing slopes.

10.3 Access

Although the foreshore below the stack could be reached by walking along a narrow and rocky track a few metres to the east of the site, this was extremely slippery when wet, and would have been overly complicated to protect with safety equipment. It was therefore considered safer and easier to attach a fixed rope from the highest point of the landward cliff edge (illus 30, 33 and 34), and abseil down this to the foreshore. From here a relatively easy scramble up the south-east corner of the stack was required, with a fixed rope maintaining security. The rope on the landward side was anchored at two points into a secure rock outcrop using pitons placed into cracks, and on the stack side the rope was anchored by placing an aluminium stake into the soil to a safe depth, with a series of further anchors placed at intervals on the steeper sections of the route. Where stakes were used, they were placed in an area beyond obvious archaeological deposits.

10.4 Previous work

The Ordnance Survey in 1852:

> The ruin of what is supposed to have been an old castle, on a small island on the coast at Arnistean. There is no part of it visible at present, except about half a dozen large stones in its foundation. [Ordnance Survey Name Book 1852]

No local traditions describing the use of the supposed dun were recorded at the time, although there is a tradition today that the occupants of the site had a family dispute and some left to go and live at Cnocan Glas (NGR: NB 5013 5971), sited on the flood plain of Dell River (Angus Smith, pers comm; Robson 2004, 12). Cnocan Glas is cited in the NMR as being 'shieling huts (possible), mounds', NB55NW 44. Similar pottery was recovered from both sites by Professor Murray Campbell during his investigations of them in the 1970s (see below). Recent geophysical survey of this site has identified a circular stone structure, possibly the remains of a prehistoric roundhouse, lying beneath one of the mounds (Barrowman, C S 2007b), 46–56). Pottery and round clay beads from these mounds have also recently come to light (Barrowman, C S 2007b, 54).

The Royal Commission described the site as having been a 'circular tower' (RCAHMS 1928). The Ordnance Survey record for 1969 describes the conical stack as being 'of difficult access' with no traces of walling being visible, and no certainty whether the site was ever a fortification.

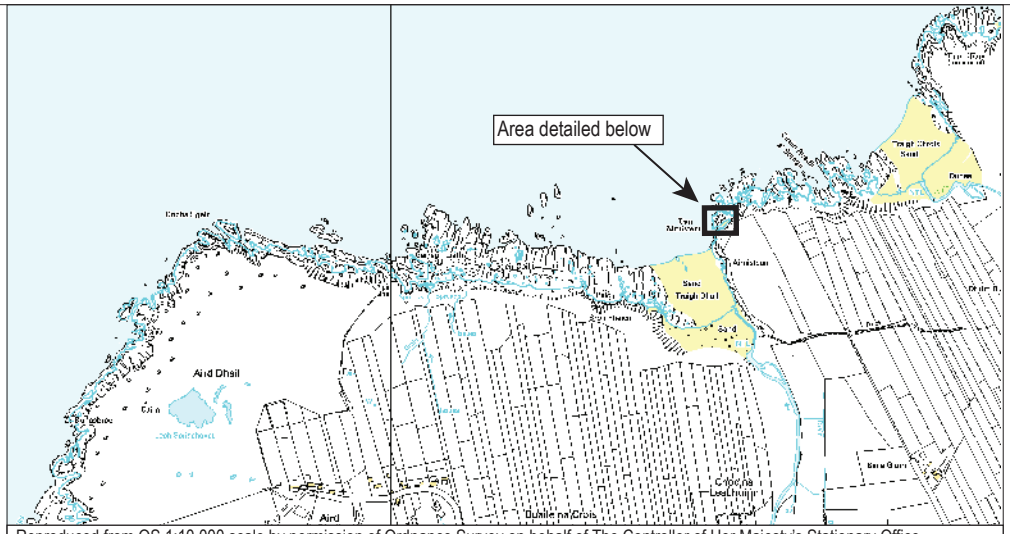
In 1970 the late Professor Murray Campbell undertook an investigation of the site. There are no available site records from this work, and only personal recollections from local people who were involved with the project.

The NMR entry states:

> Considerable quantities of Iron Age pottery found during the summer of 1970, together with traces of walling exposed by howking. Some of the pottery sherds are in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, and in the possession of Dr Campbell, the finder. (M Campbell, Dept of Chemistry, Heriot-Watt University.)
>
> (Information from Audrey S Henshall, 15 June 1969)

In correspondence with staff of the National Museum, the trench section showed three levels: a top ash level, a central sandy loam layer 9–10 inches (0.26–0.28m) thick, with a basal ash layer. Numerous

Illus 31 (opposite) Location map and topographic survey of Dun Arnistean showing erosion scars



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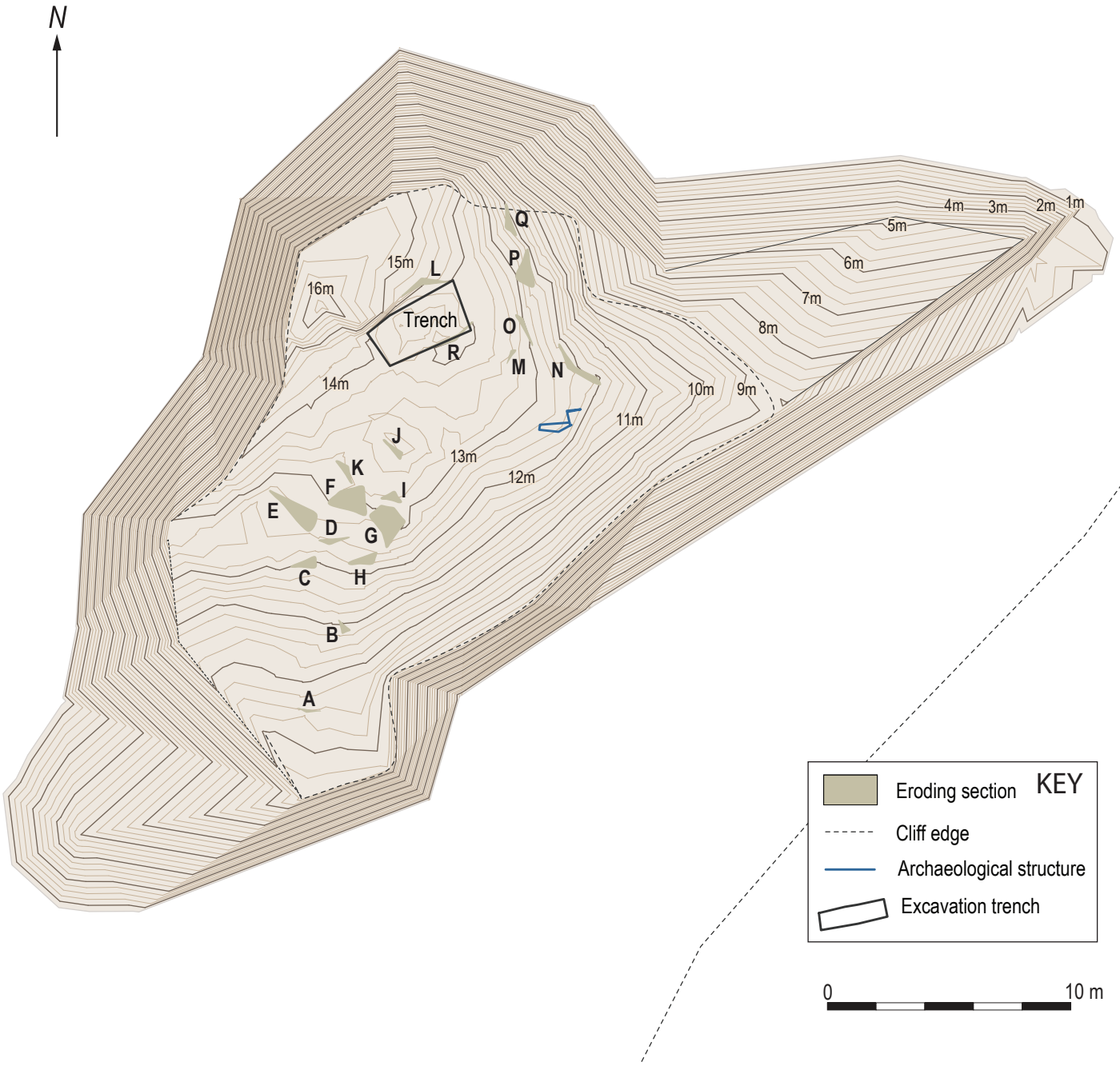

Illus 32 General view of erosion scars on Dun Arnistean from the south-west

stone pounders, whetstones and stone discs were discarded; there was also said to have been much bone present (Cowie 1995, 15). Several highly decorated Iron Age pottery sherds were recovered. Approximately 35 sherds were donated to the NMS, and some others to the Comunn Eachdraidh Nis (Ann MacSween pers comm). A pottery disc bead, 0.8" (20mm) diameter was also donated to the NMS, along with two stone discs, assumed to be pot lids. More pottery was also recovered in August 1971.

The site was visited and recorded again in 1978 as part of a coastal survey concentrating on prehistoric sites in Lewis undertaken by the then Central Excavation Unit (CEU). This work was commissioned by the Scottish Development Department, Historic Building and Monuments Board (the predecessor of Historic Scotland), and led by Trevor Cowie (Cowie 1995). They recorded:

> The traces of the 'excavation' area were still clearly visible (even from the coast edge) in 1978. Despite the exposed location, erosion was limited to the exposed faces of the trench from which sherds (with a total weight of 964g) were recovered. As a result of further erosion and/or disturbance of the site, further pottery, including a complete vessel, was recovered in 1983 (in private possession). (Cowie 1995, 15–16)

The pottery recovered by the 1978 survey was subsequently analysed by Alan Lane (Lane 1995). He classified the sherds as being from the Late Iron Age/Dark Age, with diagnostic 'zigzag cordons appearing on what may be flaring rim vessels' (ibid, 4). Further vessels are described from the Dark Ages (the Late Iron Age pre-Norse period), with '. . . two flaring rims and two bases with tongue-and-groove construction . . .' although 'there are also cordons in the same collection and the whole group could belong to the Late Iron Age style'. A possible Norse bowl form was also recovered from this assemblage (ibid, 5).

Mention was also made of the discovery in 1983 of a complete pottery vessel from the site. This was excavated by Mr Vaughan and Mrs M Ponting (now Mrs M Curtis), and is now in the possession of Mr Vaughan, who moved away from the island in the 1980s. This is the most recent record of any investigation on the site, although it is known that other individuals have discovered and removed pottery from the site (M Robson pers comm). A broken rotary quern

Illus 33 The survey team descending ropes on Dun Arnistean from the east

Illus 34 The descent of Dun Arnistean from the east.

Illus 35 Erosion scar F on Dun Arnistean from the west. Scale 0.3m long.

from the site is in the possession of Mrs M Curtis, and this has been examined and photographed.

10.5 The survey (illus 31)

As mentioned above, the southern area of the stack was mainly turfed over. A level plateau sat below the rock outcrop on the centre of the site measuring *c* 9 × 6m, and eroding grassy slopes fell away to the south-west, south and south-east of this for approximately 5m before they levelled out slightly, and then fell away more steeply to bare, vertical cliff faces. A small rectangular sunken area was located against the vertical face of a rock outcrop in the centre of the stack. This measured *c* 5 × 2m internally, and *c* 7 × 3m externally. The rock face measured *c* 6m at its longest, and 2.5m high. This feature may relate to Campbell's excavation trench, although a local informant who helped during the excavations suggested the trench was much smaller and that the feature is the remains of a building (A Murray, North Dell pers comm). There is certainly walling visible in the south-east corner of this sunken area, but it lies at right-angles to the exposed section.

Possible turfed-over footings remain of two lengths of wall, one running parallel to the vertical face of the rock outcrop forming the longest side, and one to the east that abuts the rock face to the north, and joins the side wall to the south, forming an end. A near-vertical grassy slope falls away immediately to the east of this end. No stonework is visible within this feature, although the internal faces of the walls described above are actively eroding. A shallow 'spade-hole' measuring 0.3 × 0.3 × 0.3m was noted in the north-west corner of the structure.

Another short section of turf-covered wall standing to no more than *c* 0.3m lies south-west of this building, and may represent a separate structure. Halfway down the south-eastern slope, three large boulders sit on a level contour approximately 5m below the higher plateau. Scant turf footings of a small section of wall lie *c* 1m to the east of these. This feature is in line with the most obvious landward access route to the main part of the site.

The remainder of the archaeological features are represented by a series of short and exposed lengths of walling and scatters of artefacts, all eroding from scars to the south-west of the main building.

There are 18 significant eroding scars, described below as A–R (illus 31 for location).

A – The lowest point of the stack in the south-west corner. This curvilinear area of erosion was south-facing and measured *c* 0.5m in length and *c* 0.1m deep. The soil matrix was silty sand with pottery sherds and shell throughout, possibly a midden deposit. Two unworked beach pebbles were also present.

B – A small scar facing south which measured *c* 0.2m long by *c* 0.1m deep. The eroding soil is the same as in scar A above.

C – A curvilinear south-facing scar, which measured *c* 0.2m in length and *c* 0.2m deep. A section of drystone walling, three courses high, was noticed protruding and slumping from the west side of this scar. The flat stone used in the wall was Lewisian gneiss and each stone measured on average 400mm wide by 100mm thick. Undecorated pottery sherds were recovered from this scar.

D – Two courses of walling were visible with stones of similar dimensions to C above, which might have related to the walling in erosion scar C. Pottery and burnt animal bone were also present.

E – Bedrock was exposed in the west of this scar which extended *c* 1.5m to the east and was on average *c* 0.2m in depth (including scars F and G). It was divided into three due to its erratic shape. It faced south for *c* 0.2m, then curving to the north-east as scar F, and finally swung south to face west (scar G). There was a large amount of tumbled masonry and collapsed walling protruding from these combined scars, along with distinctive occupation deposits and ash layers (illus 35).

F – The middle part of this scar ran as a deep curvilinear scar. As can be seen on illus 35 the wall section had at least four courses and large foundation stones. It may have represented a revetment to the more level plateau at the top of the site (see below).

There were many natural beach pebbles and some worked stone tools from this scar, along with pottery. The distinctive ash layer appeared to be slumped to the eastern side of the wall, and contained distinctive separate layers and charcoal (illus 36). This feature may have represented redeposited hearth material rather than in situ deposits.

Illus 36 The ash layer in erosion scar F, Dun Arnistean from the west. Scale 0.3m long.

G – The eastern third of the scar ran almost north to south and faced west. More slumped walling was noted to the west of this, and pottery and carbonised material was present within occupational deposits.

H – A small semi-circular scar facing south-west, just to the south of scar G. This measured *c* 0.3m in overall length, by *c* 0.1m deep. Some pottery and small stones representing masonry were present.

I – This was a short and shallow scar to the north-east of G, which measured *c* 0.4 × 0.1m. Pottery was again recovered, with masonry appearing in the scar. The soil matrix was silty sand and similar to that noted previously.

J – This scar was on the more level plateau of the site, and appeared to be cut into what looked like the turf-covered footings of a wall. The scar ran NW/SE and faced south-west. It measured *c* 0.6m in length and 0.2m deep. There were five large stones lying side by side along its length, indicating a wall, with a possible second course below. Pottery was recovered from amongst the stones. In plan, the wall was aligned NW/SE and was about 2m long and 1m wide. It ended abruptly to the south-east.

K – A very shallow west-facing scar, less than 0.1m high and *c* 0.5m long. Pottery sherds were noted throughout its silty sandy matrix.

L – This scar lay to the north of the sunken area, and was south-facing (illus 37). It exposed the soil lying over the rock outcrop, and ran from the top of the stack to the top of the east wall of the building. It measured *c* 1.3m long by 0.3–0.4m deep.

The soil matrix in this scar was fine silt and may have included ash or decomposed turf. Pottery and a possible pebble smoother were recovered from this deposit, which may have been dumped spoil from previous excavations.

M – A small scar that measured *c* 0.2 × 0.1m to the south of the main structure which faced south. A sheep scapula was present eroding from this. The soil matrix was silty sand.

N – This scar lay to the south-east corner of the contour running *c* 5m below the level plateau. A large

Illus 37 The erosion scar L, Dun Arnistean from the south-west. Scale 0.3m long.

stone *c* 0.5 × 0.4m sat at the south end of this scar, and may have formed the end of a wall (described above) running N/S along the extreme east side of the stack.

O, P and Q – Three eroding scars on the east-facing steep grassy slope. These all consisted of eastward-slanting, tumbled walling with no discernible coursework and masonry blocks measuring *c* 0.5 × 0.2m. The soil matrix was fine silty sand, with occasional charcoal flecks throughout. These scars suffered from both marine and animal erosion, including nesting fulmar. Measurements of these scars were on average 0.4–0.6m long by 0.3m deep. The soil exposed in scar Q lay directly over a rock outcrop.

R – An exposed scar along the internal north-facing wall of the building, which measured *c* 2 × *c* 0.4m. There were five courses of stonework visible on the eastern end of the scar, relating to the end wall of a building truncated by excavation. The soil matrix was very fine silt, similar to the deposit in scar L, and it contained pottery sherds. Occasional stones that may have related to the structure of the wall appeared across the scar.

Approximately 80 sherds of pottery, 10 pebble tools (including small hammerstones and rubbers), 2 chips of flint and several pieces of animal bone were recovered and surveyed in situ. The distribution of artefacts was fairly uniformly spread around the eroding scars.

10.6 Discussion

This site is of great interest and importance to the settlement record of Ness. The fact that it has been examined in some detail by many others over the past 40 years adds historical significance to the site. The recovery of such a large amount of material demonstrated that there are archaeological remains still worthy of investigation on the site.

Information given about the past activities on the site raises a variety of questions about the interpretation of the structures as seen today. Mr Alec Dan Murray (North Dell) pointed out where Professor Murray Campbell had excavated in the 1970s, within the sunken area on the level plateau of the site. He stated that the small 'spade-hole' in the north-west corner of the structure was the remains

of Campbell's investigations, the full extent of the excavations. However, it seems more likely that the edges of the sunken area are the edges of Campbell's trench, rather than the eroding internal faces of walls.

There is no surviving evidence on Dun Arnistean for the substantial monumental structures often associated with Iron Age occupation, despite the presence of Iron Age pottery. This negative evidence is supported by the dating of the ceramics (see Appendix 3) to the latter part of the Iron Age, *c* 4th to 6th century AD, a period during which architectural forms seem to have become rather less monumental (Armit 1996, 162–78).

Examination of the site through more intensive survey and possible trial excavation is proposed in the future. It is suggested that further recording and recovery of artefacts is undertaken within the next five years, as surface erosion of structures and exposed occupational layers will continue at a steady pace.

It seems likely that a Late Iron Age/Norse building is present at Dun Arnistean. Further analysis should be undertaken on not only the most recently recovered artefacts, but on the collections in the NMAS and in private hands. Attempts should also be made to obtain copies of any notes or drawings that may survive from Professor Campbell's excavations.

Catastrophic erosion and collapse of structures is not likely to occur, due to the nature of the site.