
2 INTRODUCTION

2.1 *The STAC project*

Coastal erosion is an acute problem throughout Scotland, but is most archaeologically damaging in the island groups of Orkney, Shetland and the Hebrides, which have very long and exposed coastlines in proportion to their land area. Since the 1980s, an assessment of the importance of threatened coastal archaeological sites has been undertaken by Historic Scotland (Ashmore 1994; Dawson 2003) throughout Scotland. This has involved several Coastal Assessment Surveys as well as a number of sample excavations on eroding sites (Ashmore 2003, 2). Management of coastal archaeology is an increasing problem and will become more so. There must therefore be further systematic work to catalogue and research coastal sites, to allow appropriate management decisions to be made.

Recent coastal erosion assessments commissioned by Historic Scotland in the Western Isles (eg Burgess & Church 1997) highlighted the presence of classes of coastal site about which very little is known, in particular, stack and promontory settlements. These sites are typically elevated and exposed, and therefore peculiarly and selectively vulnerable to erosion. In the proceedings of a Historic Scotland seminar on the problem of coastal erosion, Patrick Ashmore emphasised the threat to such sites, finding ‘erosion of sites such as promontory enclosures on incised cliffs . . . to be of main concern’ (Ashmore 2003, 209).

The greatest obstacle to research on these sites has been the risk of access. In the Coastal Erosion Assessment, Lewis (CEAL), Burgess & Church stated that ‘The majority of stack sites were inaccessible and hence viewed from the closest available cliff top’ (Burgess & Church 1997). The Severe Terrain Archaeological Campaign (STAC) was established as a pilot project in 2003 to take advantage of the skills and experience of a group of archaeologists with Industrial Rope Access qualifications (see Section 5.1), in order to overcome the risks of accessing such sites and was followed by two further seasons of survey and trial excavation in 2004 and 2005 (see Appendix 1 for the project design).

2.2 *Previous work*

A dedicated study of the promontory forts of Orkney and Caithness was carried out by Raymond Lamb

in the 1970s (Lamb 1980). He found that a great many such sites were Iron Age, whether defensive (*ibid*, 65), concerned with status (*ibid*, 68), or else early medieval and monastic in function (Lamb 1976 and Lamb 1980, in preface; Lamb 1973, 1976, 1980). He did, however, speculate that the anomalous site of Brough Ness of Garth, Sandness, Shetland (amongst others), ‘is so peculiar that one wonders whether it belongs to some other period than the Early Iron Age’ (Lamb 1980, 68). More recent research and evaluation has revealed a wide chronological range for such sites, from the Neolithic to the sixteenth century (Branigan & Foster 2000, 86; Burgess 1999, 93–104; Barrowman, C S 2002, 2004; forthcoming a & b; Barrowman & McHardy 2005; Barrowman R C 2006; and Brady et al 2000), and a similarly wide functional range must probably be assumed.

Rope access techniques have previously been used in Scotland on only two other archaeological sites, both of them coastal sea stacks. In 2000, access to Brei Holm, Papa Stour in Shetland, was established using industrial rope access techniques as part of the Viking and Early Settlement Archaeological Research Project (VESARP; Brady 2002). Similarly, in 2001 and 2002, access to Dun Eistean, off the east coast of Ness, in Lewis was achieved through rope access (Barrowman 2001, 9–10). Both sites were difficult to access although they were above the mean low water mark. The height and severity of the cliffs on the landward sides of the stacks warranted the use of specialist climbing techniques for safe navigation. A combination of industrial rope access techniques was therefore used, employing horizontal Tyrolean traverses and vertical fixed ropes to enable safe access onto the sites at most times.

2.3 *Project members*

In 2003, the STAC project was directed by Mary MacLeod, and staffed by Chris Barrowman, Mark Elliott and Ian McHardy (MacLeod 2003). In 2004, the project was co-directed by Chris Barrowman and Ian McHardy with the help of Mark Elliott in the field. The 2005 season was directed by Ian McHardy, with help from Mark Elliott and Graeme Laidlaw in the field. All members of the team were trained in rope skills prior to work commencing (see Section 5.1).