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## 15 CAISTEAL A' MHORAIR

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### 15.1 Physical description and location

Caisteal a' Mhorair (NGR: NB 5368 4970; NMRS no. NB54NW 1; SAM 5250) lies at the south end of Traigh Ghearadha. The stack on which it sits is only *c* 23m high but is a thin, near-vertical finger of rock rising to a plateau 8–9m wide at maximum (illus 53). It is the tallest and most substantial of three such rock pillars rising from the intertidal zone of Traigh Ghearadha (Garry Beach). High cliffs frame the relatively small beach to the north and south, which is at the intersection of an eroding sandy geomorphic cell and stable Lewisian gneiss rock platform (Burgess & Church 1997, 309).

### 15.2 Erosion

The previous surveys and descriptions are largely accurate, and there is little sign of erosion on either the access to the site, or the stack itself. Burgess & Church agree that the area is 'stable' (ibid, 307).

### 15.3 Access

Access onto the stack involved climbing directly from the beach approximately 10m up a steep grassy path flanked by small rock outcrops. Climbing techniques were used, with a mixture of temporary rock anchors and pitons providing security.



Illus 53 Caisteal a' Mhorair from the south





*Illus 55 Caisteal a' Mhorair, Structure A from the south*

#### 15.4 Previous work

Caisteal a' Mhorair was not identified by Captain Thomas, and seems to have been first recorded by a Peter Liddel, Esq., Gress, Lewis, who wrote to the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries, 8 June 1874:

Castle Rock at North Tolsta – This ancient strength . . . is built on a near-perpendicular stack of rock 100 feet high, and isolated at high water. The building, which the inhabitants of the district call 'The castle', consists of an oblong chamber of irregularly rectangular shape, nearly 40 feet long and 13 feet wide, with a smaller chamber about 10 feet by 8, opening off it by a door 2 feet wide in the centre of the end wall. Close to this end of the building there is a circular space nearly 6 feet in diameter and 3 feet deep, which has been quarried out of the rock, and may have been a well. Fragments of the coarse pottery called 'craggans' were found in it. I dug all over the floor of the

chamber. The walls are of unhewn stones, backed with earth. There had been a fireplace at each side of the door, close beside the wall. Broken 'craggans' and stones that had been used as hammers or pounders were found all over the floor. There were but a few bones, which may be accounted for by the facilities they had for disposing of them by throwing them at once over the rock.

The site was mapped on the second edition of the Ordnance Survey of Lewis in 1898, but was not described in detail until the 1928 RCAHMS Inventory:

There is a dun on Caisteal a' Mhorair. This is a pinnacle of rock rising some 70ft above the sand on the S side of Traigh Geiraha.

The flat, oval summit, measuring some 60ft from ESE to WNW by about 24ft, is encircled by a wall now 4–6ft wide and 1½ft high. The greater part, towards the NW, is occupied by a roughly rectangular chamber 32ft long and 14ft broad, entered 11ft from the NW end by a passage in the SW

*Illus 54 (opposite) Location map and topographic survey, Caisteal a' Mhorair*

flank 2ft 9ins broad and walled for a length of 14ft. Access to this entrance is obtained by climbing a dangerously steep rib of rock opposite it, the cliff otherwise being unclimbable.

'Opening from the SE end of the main chamber through a passage about 2ft wide and 4ft long is a smaller chamber lying transversely across the summit, 10½ft long and 7ft broad. Between this latter division and the SE extremity of the summit, which contracts to a width of about 15ft, is a circular stone lined hollow 5ft in diameter and 1½ft deep. A quern stone and fragments of rough hand-made pottery have been found here.' (RCAHMS 1928, visited 3 July 1914)

It was surveyed at a scale of 1:10 000 by the Ordnance Survey in 1969.

### 15.5 The survey (*illus 54*)

The site was as described by the RCAHMS, with one building taking up the whole of the summit. This building had three compartments, and an access track wound steeply up the west face of the

stack, leading straight to the entrance of the main compartment.

#### *Structure A*

Structure A was the largest enclosure on the top of the stack. It was sub-rectangular, orientated E/W, with its western wall set *c* 0.5m away from the perimeter of the stack and its eastern wall on the edge of the stack (*illus 55*). It measured *c* 9.5 × 4m internally, with stone walls 1–1.5m thick. It was entered from the access route by a narrow, south-facing door *c* 0.8m wide, but another opening, *c* 0.5m wide, was present in the north-eastern corner of the building.

#### *Structure B*

Structure B adjoined Structure A via an entrance in the eastern wall of the latter. It was a rectilinear room, *c* 3 × 2m internally, with no other obvious openings in its walls. It was similarly constructed of stone (*illus 56*).

#### *Structure C*

Structure C adjoined Structure B to the east but there was no obvious entrance and it was much



*Illus 56 Caisteal a' Mhorair Structures B and C from the north*

less well constructed than either Structure A or B. It consisted of a circular rubble and turf wall with an internal diameter of *c* 1m. It fully occupied the eastern end of the stack. The surviving width of its walls varied between 1 and 2m.

### *15.6 Discussion*

Caisteal a' Mhorair (the Castle of the Big Man, or Nobleman) is one of the few possible medieval castles in the Isle of Lewis. Comparison with excavated structures at Dun Eistean (Barrowman, R C 2006; Barrowman, R C et al 2007) suggests that Structure B might have been a small tower.

Structure A is of a size to have been a small hall, although it is also possible that it was merely an enclosed courtyard.

Liddel's (1874) evidence is significant in that it would suggest that the site was actually occupied with fireplaces and debris such as pottery, bones and hammer/pounder stones.

There were no signs of erosion to the structure, or the stack on which it stands.

### *15.7 Potential for future work*

The site is presently secure, with no signs of erosion to the structure, or the stack on which it stands.