

Re-excavation of an Iron Age wheelhouse and earlier structure at Eilean Maleit, North Uist

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with contributions by A Braby & R Strachan

ABSTRACT

Excavations were carried out on the tidal islet settlement of Eilean Maleit, previously excavated by Erskine Beveridge in the early part of this century, to test the hypothesis that the site represented a wheelhouse built into an earlier Atlantic roundhouse or broch. It is clear from the re-excavation that the wheelhouse was indeed set into an earlier massive-walled drystone structure, probably an Atlantic roundhouse but almost certainly not a classic broch tower. The denuded condition of this early structure when the wheelhouse was built suggests that a significant period of time may have elapsed between the occupation of the two structures. Publication of this work is sponsored by Historic Scotland.

INTRODUCTION

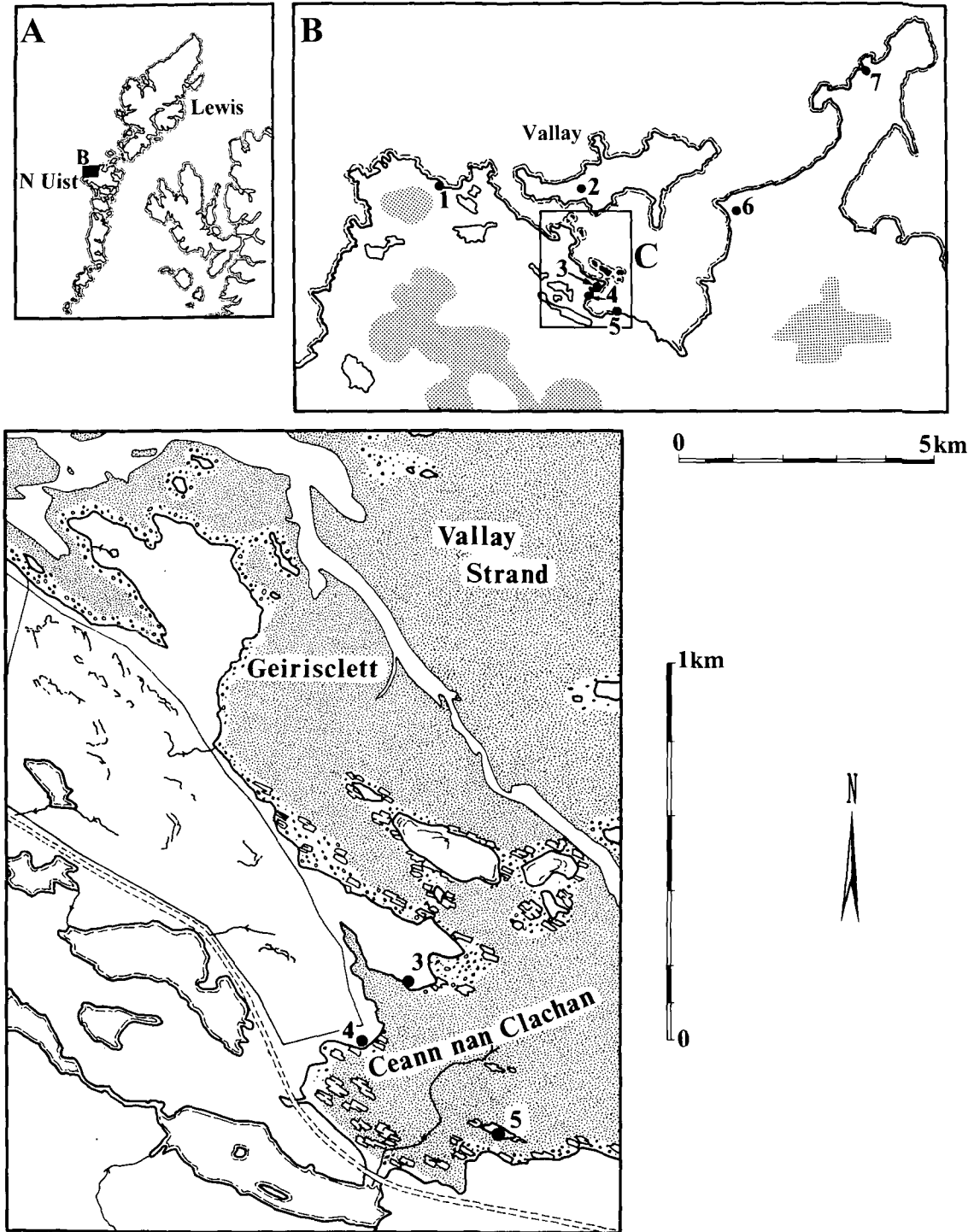
Eilean Maleit is a rocky tidal islet on the south side of the Vallay Strand (illus 1), a vast expanse of inter-tidal sands on the north coast of North Uist (NGR: NF 7748 7388, NMRS ref: NF 77 SE 5). The islet is connected to the shore by a substantial stone causeway some 2 m wide and around 30 m long, and is accessible except at unusually high tides. The islet has an elevation of some 4 m, with a steep, rocky northern face and an only slightly gentler southern approach (illus 2). Close to the summit lie the remains of an Iron Age wheelhouse and cellular structures, partly cleared out and excavated by the antiquarian Erskine Beveridge in the early part of the 20th century (Beveridge 1911, 207–9).

During September 1995 the site was re-surveyed and partly re-excavated in an attempt to test the hypothesis that the wheelhouse, rather than being the primary focus of settlement, was a secondary structure, built into an earlier Atlantic roundhouse or broch tower. It was hoped that, as at the nearby Sollas wheelhouse, Beveridge had left unexcavated deposits *in situ* (cf Campbell 1991).

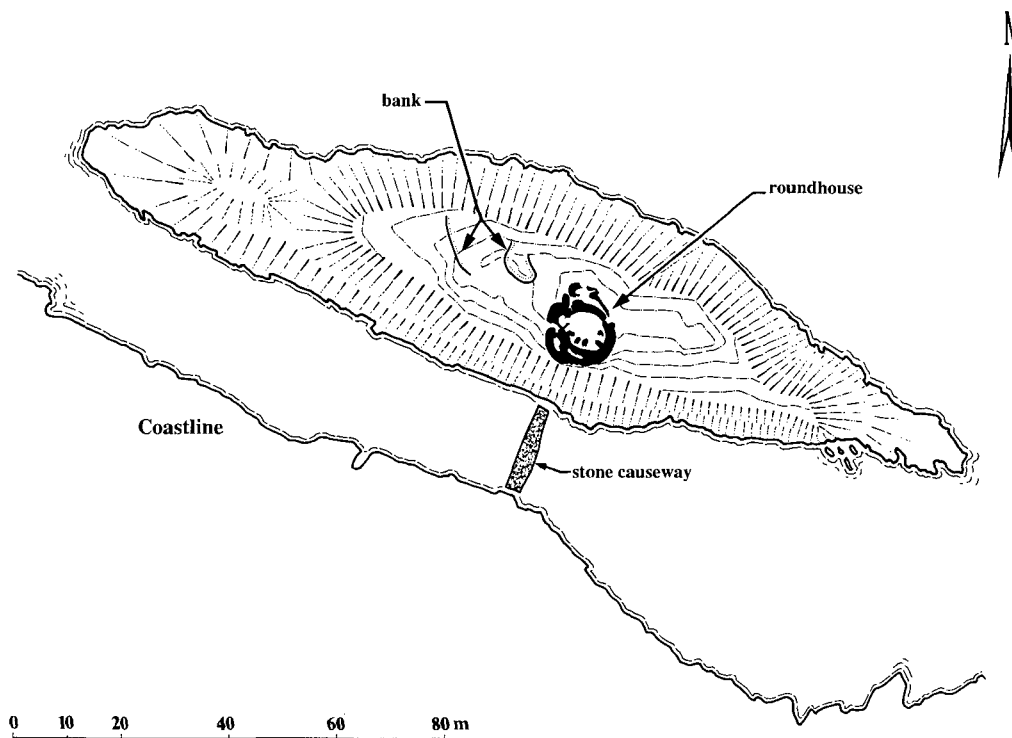
VALLAY STRAND WHEELHOUSES

The area around the Vallay Strand is an exceptionally rich archaeological landscape with outstanding evidence of former settlement patterns, from the later prehistoric to post-medieval periods in particular (illus 1, Armit & Dunwell forthcoming). Eilean Maleit is one of three closely

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ILLUS 1 Location map: 1 Foshigarry; 2 Bac Mhic Connain; 3 Garry Iochdrach; 4 Cnoc a Comhdhalach; 5 Eilean Malcit; 6 Sollas; 7 the Udal. (Based on the Ordnance Survey map © Crown copyright)



ILLUS 2 Plan of the islet showing contours at 1 m intervals on summit; the areas marked by hachures, surrounding the summit, are principally bare rock

spaced wheelhouses excavated by Erskine Beveridge in the Vallay Strand area in the early part of this century; the others being Cnoc a Comhdhalach (Beveridge 1911, 200–6) and Garry Iochdrach (Beveridge 1931). While there are several other wheelhouse sites in the Vallay Strand area (illus 1), including Foshigarry (Beveridge 1930), Bac Mhic Connain (Beveridge 1931), Sollas (Campbell 1991), and the Udal (Crawford & Switsur 1977), it has been suggested that Eilean Maleit and its two close neighbours are distinct in being secondary constructions within earlier structures of complex Atlantic roundhouse form (Armit 1992, chap 12): traces of what appear originally to have been intra-mural galleries and cells are discernible within the structural clutter represented on the original excavation plans of each (illus 3).

This suggested sequence, by which Atlantic roundhouses are remodelled as wheelhouses, forms part of the basis for the wider interpretation of the relationship between Atlantic roundhouses and wheelhouses in the Western Isles. In particular, along with radiocarbon dating evidence from wheelhouse sites like Cnip in Lewis, Sollas in North Uist and Dun Bharabhat in Lewis (summarized in Armit 1996) this interpretation provides support for the hypothesis that wheelhouses are generally later than Atlantic roundhouses in the Western Isles; and that, in broad terms, the settlement pattern with which wheelhouses are associated is later than that associated with Atlantic roundhouses (this does not, of course, mean that certain Atlantic roundhouses, for example fully developed broch towers like those at Dun Carloway or Loch na Berie in Lewis, need not be contemporary with some wheelhouses).

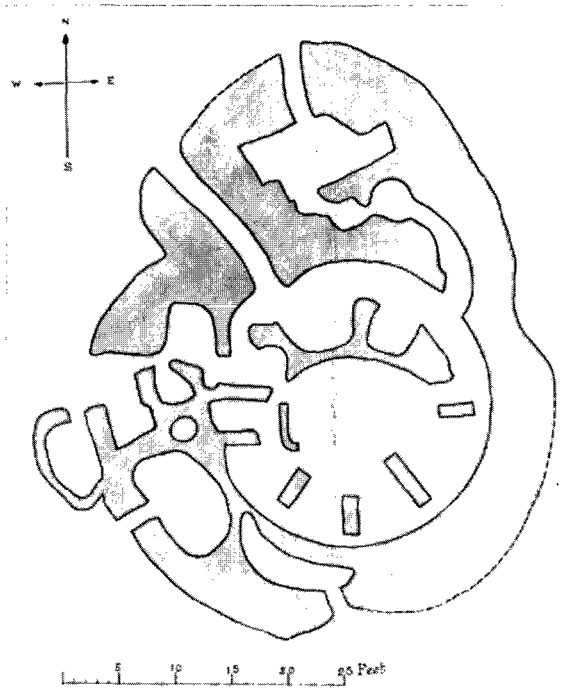
It was decided in 1995, therefore, to select one of the three Vallay Strand wheelhouses for re-excavation in order to test the hypothesis that these wheelhouses were secondary structures

within complex Atlantic roundhouses. Eilean Maleit was chosen primarily because the lack of apparent soil depth within the interior of the structure suggested that there had been little or no backfilling of Beveridge's trenches, and that any untouched primary deposits might, therefore, be accessible in the limited time available. Both Garry Iochdrach and Cnoc a Comhdhalach appear to have a much greater internal depth of deposits which, on the basis of Beveridge's accounts of his excavations (1931, 1911), suggests that they had been backfilled to a considerable extent, perhaps to stabilize the piers.

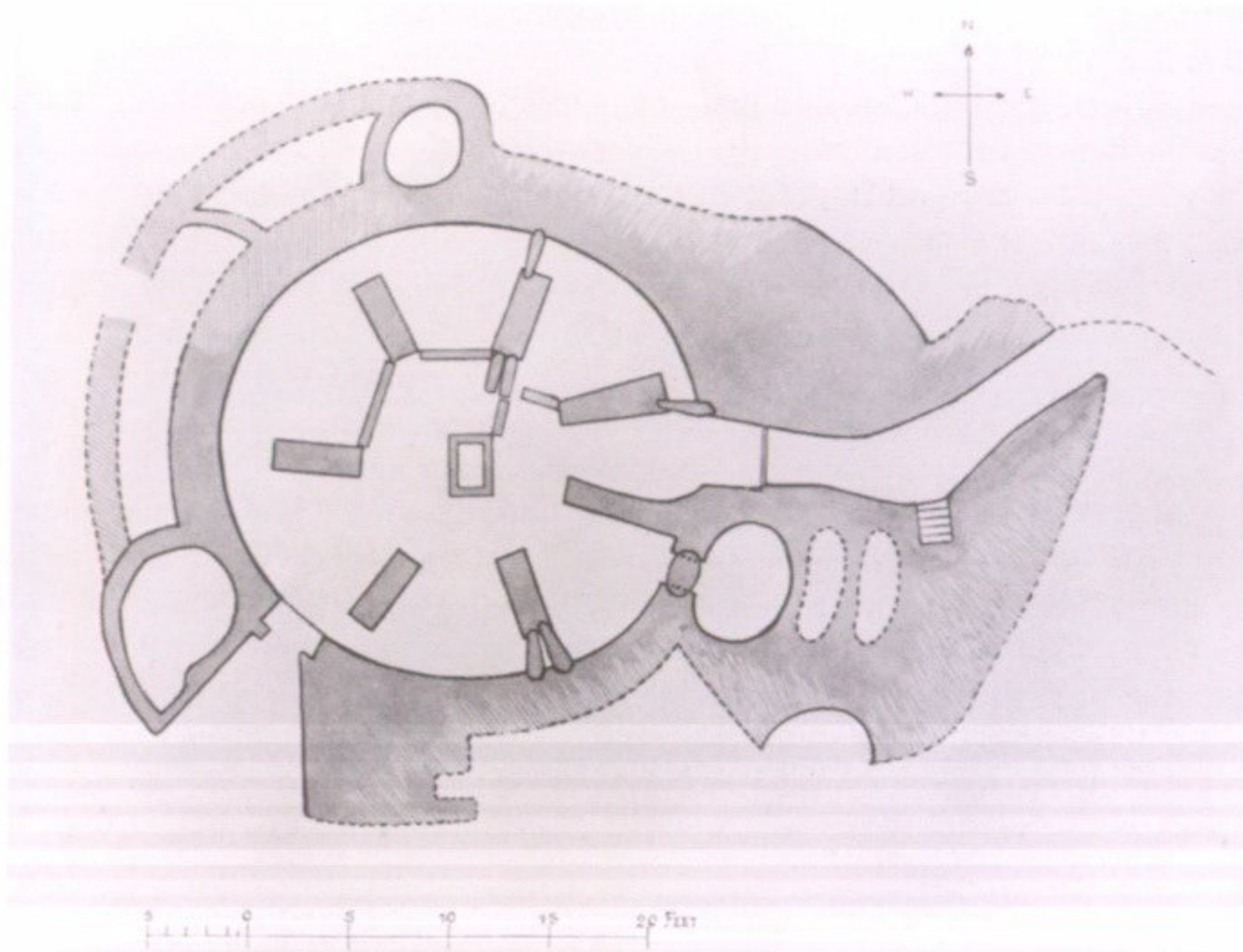
BEVERIDGE'S EXCAVATIONS

Beveridge's 800-word account of his excavations at Eilean Maleit (1911, 207–9) is restricted largely to a general locational description, a brief list of finds (see below) and a detailed verbal description of the complex morphology of the exposed structural remains. The latter, however, adds little to his plan of the excavated structure (illus 3). The report, unfortunately, includes no description of the nature of the excavated deposits; no mention of their depth, consistency or variability; nor is there an indication of the limits of excavation. Significantly, there is no attempt to disentangle what appears to the modern eye to be the complex phasing of the excavated remains as presented in the published plan, other than to note that the annexes were 'evidently to be considered as of secondary origin' (*ibid*, 209). Callander's record of his discussions with Beveridge about this site in 1914 appears to confirm that the possible composite character of the excavated structure was not considered even then (cf Callander's notes in Beveridge 1931, 33).

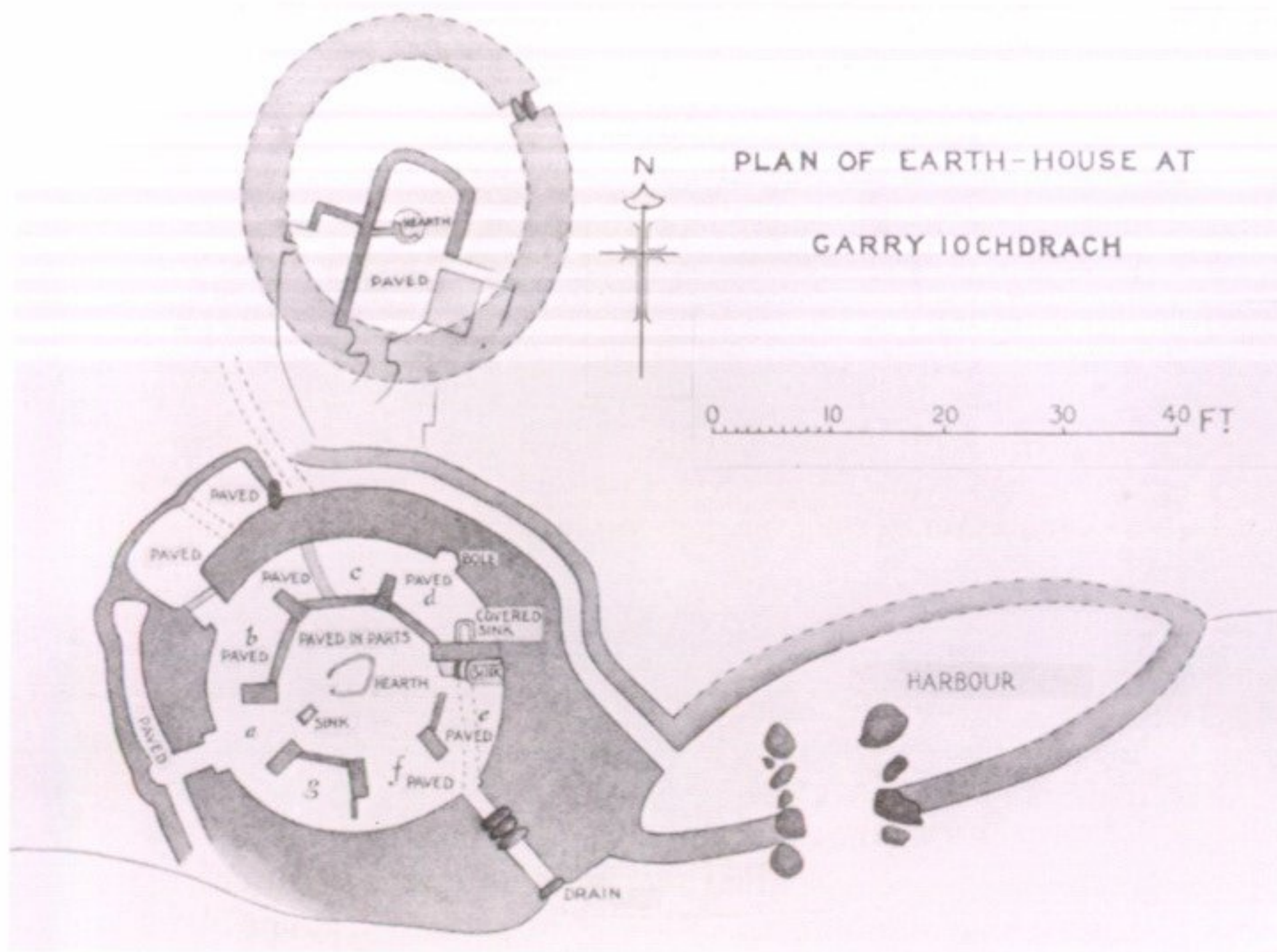
The published plan appears to show a wheelhouse approximately 7 m in internal diameter, divided by stone piers into nine bays of varying shape and size. None of the piers had any evidence



ILLUS 3A Beveridge's plan of Eilean Maleit



ILLUS 3B Beveridge's plan of Cnoc a Comhdhalach



ILLUS 3C Beveridge's plan of Garry Iochdrach

for bridging lintels linking to them to the outer wall, such as are normally found at around waist to shoulder height in better-preserved wheelhouses (cf Armit 1996, chap 8). The two westernmost piers, however, abutted the inner wheelhouse wall.

Beveridge appears to have been uncertain about the limits of the outer wall, indicating it only with a dotted line around the east arc. Elsewhere, the periphery of the wheelhouse was adjoined by a mass of cellular structures. Despite the sprawling and apparently irregular form of these cells, however, it is possible to discern traces of an intra-mural passage within an original double-walled arrangement with an original overall thickness of some 4.5 m. This is especially clear in the area of the south and west arcs. Similar arrangements, equally disturbed by later cells, can be discerned at the neighbouring sites of Cnoc a Comhdhalach and Garry Iochdrach where the circumstances of excavation and recording were similar (illus 3).

The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) plan (1928, 88–9, fig. 142) differs in a few respects from that of Beveridge, particularly in the detail of the outer cells and the disposition of certain internal piers. Although it did somewhat modify the neat circularity of the interior as shown in Beveridge's plan, it is not clear whether the site was formally re-surveyed or whether Beveridge's plan was simply modified and clarified by the RCAHMS surveyors. The RCAHMS plan was subsequently reproduced by Scott (1948) in his discussion of wheelhouses and related structures.

RE-SURVEY

WHEELHOUSE

The re-survey of the site in 1995 showed that Beveridge's original plan had been somewhat idealized although all of the main features were represented. Judging from the accuracy of certain measurements in the original plan, such as the distance between the inner ends of the extreme east and west piers, it appears that Beveridge took a number of key measurements by tape to form a basic framework, and then sketched in other features by eye. Thus the disposition and relationships of interior features are generally fairly well represented (allowing for the distortion in overall shape discussed below) while the outer wall and cellular structures away from the centre are much less faithfully rendered.

The most notable divergence, however, between Beveridge's plan and the 1995 re-survey was the shape of the interior of the building. Rather than the near-circle shown in the original plan, the interior of the structure was markedly D-shaped internally. This interior shape would have made the structure quite unsuited to the wheelhouse architectural form which depends on a complex channelling of weight stresses through the wall and stone piers, and which would have been most stable within a symmetrical circular interior (Armit, in prep). It is unlikely, therefore, that the builders of the wheelhouse would have opted for such an irregular shape if constructing the structure *de novo*, and more likely that the irregular interior was constrained by the form of the primary building on the site. The irregularity of the interior, combined with its relatively small size, might also suggest that the wheelhouse at Eilean Maleit was rather less grand than some others in the Western Isles, such as the nearby example at Sollas (Campbell 1991).

In other details, however, there is less divergence between the 1995 plan and that of Beveridge. The small wheelhouse had a maximum internal diameter of some 7.3 m, divided, as Beveridge indicated, by nine piers into nine bays. The central area defined by the inner ends of these piers is, most unusually for a wheelhouse, markedly oval with maximum dimensions of around 3.4 m ENE/WSW by 2.7 m. The inner end of each of the piers appears to have been

defined by an upright block, as was the case with some, though not all, of the piers in the wheelhouse at Cnip in Lewis (Armit in prep).

Despite the existence of breaks in the inner wall in the north-west (thought by Beveridge to be the original entrance) and NNE, both leading through access passages to the exterior of the building (the latter through apparently later cells), the entrance to the wheelhouse appears originally to have been to the WSW between the only two piers which appear to have been bonded into the inner wall-face at their basal levels. This interpretation is founded principally on the tendency at other wheelhouses, such as Kilpheder in South Uist (Lethbridge 1952, fig 2), for the only piers bonded into the inner wall-face to be those located at the entrance, seemingly reflecting a desire to lengthen the entrance passage and prevent direct access from the entrance around the 'aisle' which connects the wheelhouse bays. This is supported at Eilean Maleit by the lack of evidence for any continuation of the inner wall between these two bays, even though the presumed access has been blocked at a later stage of the site's use.

Eilean Maleit thus adds a further example to the existing list of three wheelhouses with broadly west-facing wheelhouse entrances (Cnip in Lewis, Allasdale in Barra, and Clettraval in North Uist) recently cited as exceptions to the general tendency for wheelhouses to face east (Parker Pearson & Sharples forthcoming); indeed Eilean Maleit would join this list even on Beveridge's interpretation of a north-west entrance. The existence of such a large minority of west-facers (the list should also be extended to include at least two from Jarlshof in Shetland) perhaps suggests that re-evaluation is required of the significance of the tendency towards east-facing entrances in wheelhouses.

The features within the northern part of the interior are now much less easy to define and plan than in the remainder of the interior: the present ground surface rises steeply from the central part of the interior towards the inner wall face around this arc, largely obscuring all but the ends of the piers. Beveridge noted that the two northernmost bays (which he represents as being blocked at their inner ends) were at a level 'about eighteen inches higher' than the remainder of the interior (*ibid*, 208), possibly suggesting that earlier deposits may survive unexcavated in this area (there is nothing in the original report to support Scott's (1948) explanation that the northern piers were built on a step in the underlying bedrock). With hindsight these northern bays would probably have been the most promising areas for re-excavation, but time constraints dictated that bays with less soil depth be chosen (see below).

Traces of the intra-mural galleries shown (but not apparently understood) on Beveridge's plan, are again quite distinct, although in parts modified by later construction, particularly around the north and the south-west of the structure. These would appear to indicate an original wall width of around 3 m (rather narrower than on Beveridge's plan) containing a gallery approximately 1 m wide.

THE ISLET

Ian Armit & Richard Strachan

As regards the rest of the islet there is little to add to Beveridge's description:

Before the surface was disturbed, traces of comparatively modern erections were visible both upon its centre (opposite the causeway) and towards its east and west extremities; these being evidently the remains of a dwelling and outbuildings erected by some crofter or cottar who had utilised older material which lay ready to his hand. We are informed that in like manner these modern erections — as also the causeway itself — have been quarried to serve in constructing the bridge which crosses the outlet of Loch nan Clachan (1911, 207–8).

There is now, as Beveridge suggests, no trace of these later structures, nor are there traces any longer of a possible wall along the south side of the islet observed by Beveridge (*ibid*, 208), or of a smaller islet 'close to the west of Eilean Maleit . . . with apparent traces of a former occupation' (*ibid*, 209). An eroding clump of turf clinging to the bare rock to the west of the main islet may be all that is now left of this latter feature. The only features now visible on the islet aside from the wheelhouse and adjoining cells are: a low mound immediately north-east of the wheelhouse which appears to be Beveridge's spoil-heap; an oval depression some 10 m to the north-west of the wheelhouse which may represent the remains of a structure; and a low curving turf-covered bank or wall running approximately NW/SE for a distance of some 12 m on the western periphery of the islet (illus 2).

Running approximately north/south from the shore, the stone causeway now comprises little more than a single course of large flattish slabs, stopping short of both the shore and the islet by a distance of a few metres. It is possible that the causeway is a relatively recent feature constructed to enable the robbing of stone from the islet: the date of the drowning of the Vallay Strand is presently unknown and the islet may very well have been a knoll in a dry machair landscape when the wheelhouse was occupied. Work in progress on the settlement and environmental history of the Vallay Strand may in time shed some light on this question (Armit & Dunwell forthcoming).

EXCAVATION

Ian Armit & Alan Braby

The 1995 excavations comprised two relatively small conjoined trenches; one a reopened area of the wheelhouse interior, and the other a new section through the wheelhouse wall (illus 5). A full stratigraphic report on the excavations has been deposited with the National Monuments Record of Scotland (Armit 1997) and what follows is a summary based on that report.

WHEELHOUSE INTERIOR

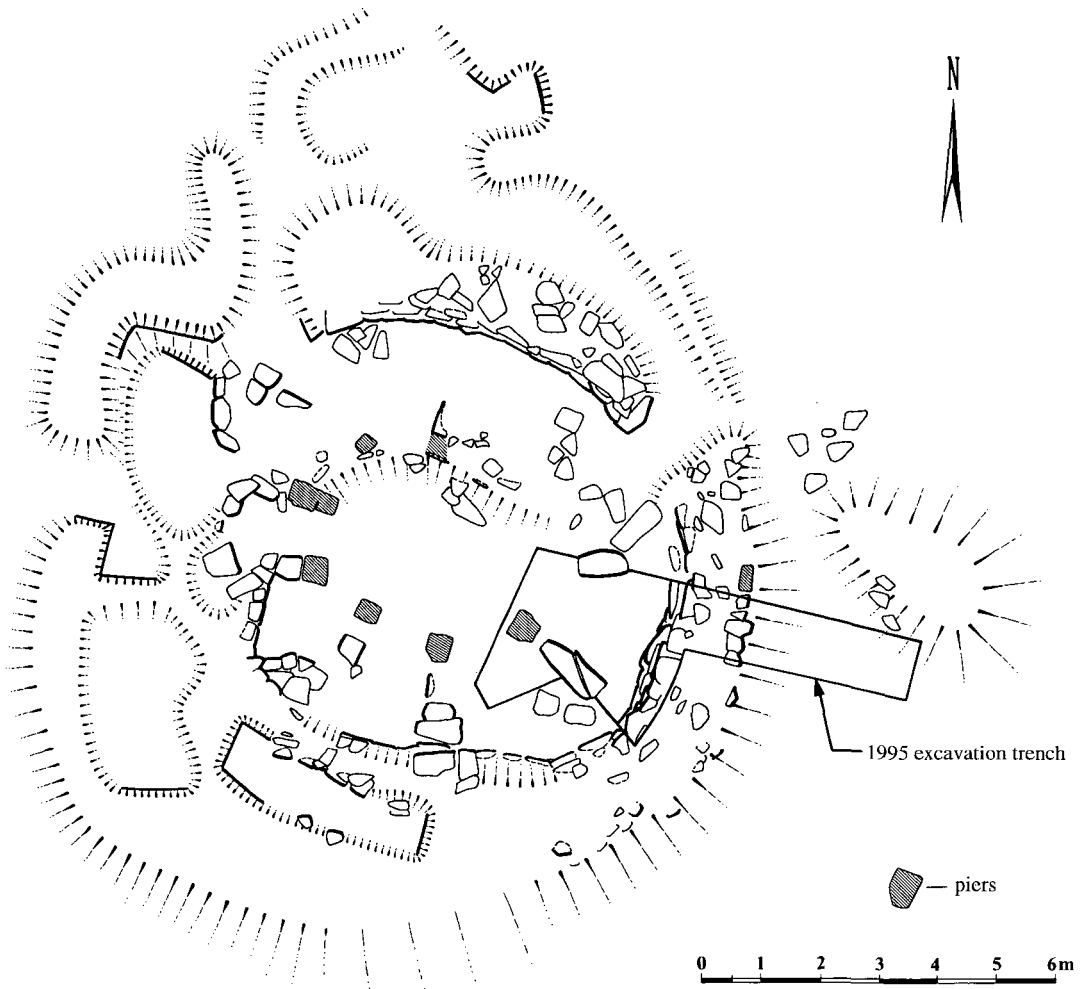
An irregularly shaped section of the north-eastern wheelhouse interior, measuring approximately 3.8 m north/south by 2.8 m in maximum extent, was reopened to assess what deposits, if any, remained within the structure and to determine whether the wheelhouse itself was the primary construction on the site. The trench encompassed one complete bay, a complete pier, and part of a second bay (illus 4–6).

Excavated deposits

It was quickly established that, in this sector at least, Beveridge had been disappointingly thorough, and had excavated to the decayed bedrock surface. The only exceptions to this pattern of destruction were around the extreme periphery of the interior, under the piers, and between the piers and wall. A few truncated cut features which had been dug into bedrock were also preserved.

The turf over the interior had apparently re-established over Beveridge's trenches, which do not appear to have been backfilled. It represents, therefore, a homogenized mixture of recent aeolian deposits and the limited surface deposits left by Beveridge. In places this deposit directly overlay the decayed surface of the gneiss bedrock.

A black peaty deposit covered much of the exposed central interior under the turf to a depth of up to 100 mm. This deposit is interpreted as recent (ie post-Beveridge) and derived from homogenized trample



ILLUS 4 Plan of interior showing trench positions, based on re-survey in 1995

and inwash from exposed deposits. However, a small patch of ash containing charcoal flecks and some pottery fragments lay above it, suggesting some doubt over its recent derivation. Although it is possible that the peaty deposit represents residual wheelhouse occupation material exposed and disturbed by Beveridge, the character of the deposit tends to suggest that it is more likely to be modern and the ash patch redeposited (perhaps by a Victorian shovel).

One of the wheelhouse piers was fully exposed in the reopened trench (illus 5–7). It comprised several large flat stones, separated by a gap of some 0.6 m from the inner wall, with an upright block at their inner end. This block was supported by a deposit of small angular packing stones. A dark silty deposit some 80 mm in maximum depth was preserved only under the pier (which Beveridge appears not to have disturbed). This deposit provided some evidence that the pier (and thus the wheelhouse) was secondary (illus 7).

Other truncated deposits survived to a limited extent within the interior of the wheelhouse. A gravelly-loam deposit was preserved directly under the turf around the extreme periphery of the interior and between and under the stones of the inner wall-face of the wheelhouse (illus 7). It is likely that this deposit formerly extended across the interior but has been truncated by Beveridge's excavations except at the extreme



ILLUS 5 The excavated area from the west

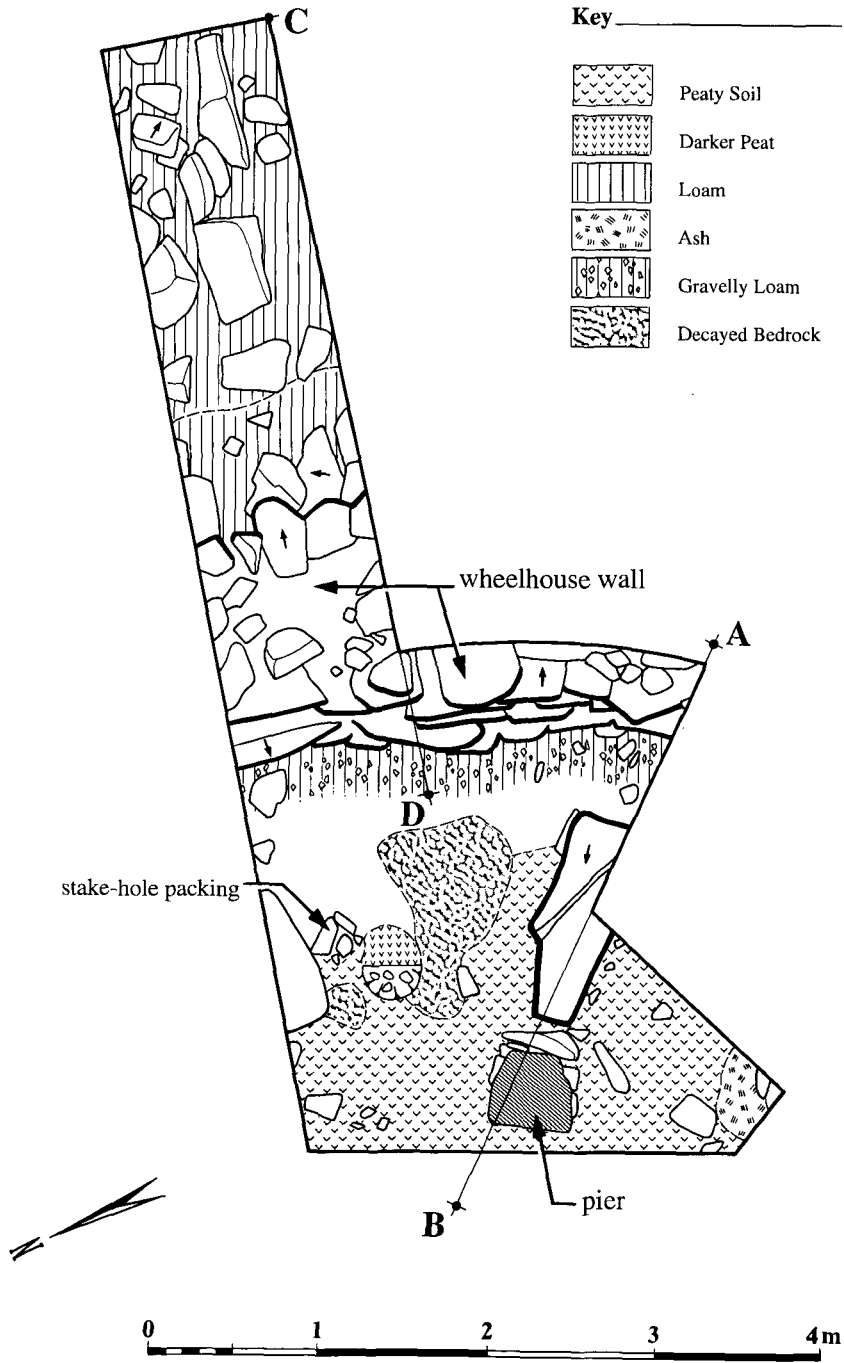
periphery. Although in the section through the interior this gravel deposit appears to abut the inner wall-face (it also abuts the wheelhouse pier), elsewhere it clearly underlay it. These stratigraphic relationships, together with the consistency of the deposit itself, suggest that it was a deliberate construction deposit, possibly a laid floor for the secondary wheelhouse.

Between the outer end of the pier and the inner wall-face Beveridge's excavations appear to have left in place a further series of truncated deposits (illus 7). Under the gravel surface described above was a thin lens of red ash, some 20 mm deep, overlying a black peaty silt some 100 mm deep. The latter clearly underlay the inner wall-face of the wheelhouse, and the wheelhouse pier, suggesting that it might represent a surviving floor deposit or abandonment deposit associated with the primary (ie pre-wheelhouse) structure.

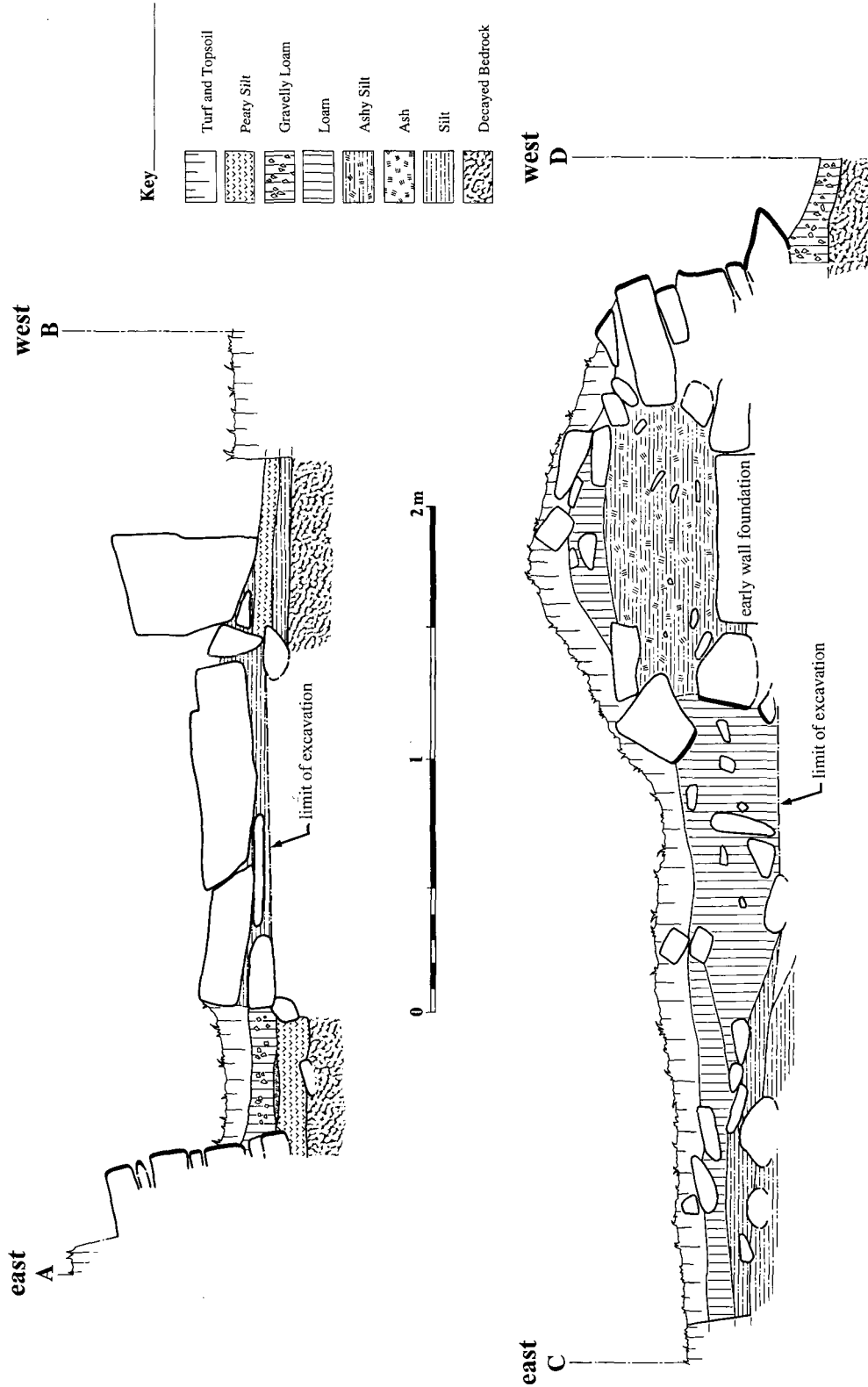
A few features were identified immediately under the regenerated turf and cut into the underlying bedrock. A small, oval pit, some 0.1 m deep and close to 0.5 m in maximum diameter, lay between the ends of the two piers exposed in the trench, slightly closer to the northern of the two. Its uniform dark brown, peaty fill contained 21 pottery sherds (see below), including one decorated with an applied wavy cordon: this was the densest concentration of pottery found on the site. Immediately adjacent to the north of the pit was a patch of small angular stones filling a truncated stake-hole some 40 mm by 30 mm in surface area by just a few millimetres deep. The truncation caused by Beveridge's excavations, however, makes it impossible to link these features to any phase of the structure.

Interpretation

Despite the disturbance caused by Beveridge's excavations it is clear that the inner wall-face of the wheelhouse and the exposed pier were secondary to a series of earlier deposits, presumably associated with an earlier structure on the same site. This hypothesis was confirmed and expanded by the examination of the wall section (see below).



ILLUS 6 Plan of the excavated area



ILLUS 7 Sections

Although only a few traces of pre-wheelhouse deposits had survived the destruction caused firstly by the construction of the wheelhouse and latterly by Beveridge's excavation, the wheelhouse wall had been set on pre-existing deposits which had been consolidated with a laid gravel surface, apparently at the time when the wheelhouse walls and pier were constructed. The surface was apparently laid after the construction of the piers (it was not present under the exposed pier) but before the accumulation of any deposits on the floor of the wheelhouse, and it filled the interstices within and under the lowest course of wall masonry. No trace of wheelhouse floor deposits survived Beveridge's excavations in this sector of the building unless the effectively unstratified cut features can be linked to this phase of occupation.

WALL SECTION

A section measuring approximately 3.8 m by 1 m and orientated approximately NE/SW was excavated outwards from the inner wheelhouse wall-face in order to determine the construction and form of the wall and to assess any evidence for multiple phase construction (illus 6). These deposits were apparently undisturbed by Beveridge's excavations, although it is likely that this area of walling had been severely robbed in the last century or earlier.

Excavated deposits

Under a superficial covering of turf and topsoil, up to 150 mm deep, was sealed a series of deposits relating to the secondary wheelhouse wall and deposits abutting it which appeared to have formed from eroded wall material (illus 7). The uppermost of these was a spread of loamy, mixed soil with a high decayed stone content up to 100 mm deep. This overlay a thicker deposit of similar soil, possibly turf-derived, and again with numerous decayed stone fragments, up to 0.5 m deep. Both of these deposits butted up against the secondary wheelhouse external wall-face and tailed off towards the east, suggesting that they were formed of material (possibly a turf superstructure) which had collapsed and/or eroded outwards from the wheelhouse wall. It is possible that this material had been disturbed by the removal of larger stones during stone-robbing operations in the last century or earlier.

The wheelhouse wall was revealed in this section to be faced both inside and out by walls, or rather revetments, built of medium to large sub-angular stones. The inner wall-face survived to five courses standing some 0.8 m high, while the outer revetment was more broken up and had little surviving coursing (illus 7). This may have been the result of stone-robbing having removed the accessible substantial stones from the outer revetment. The wall-core material was formed by a series of deposits: the uppermost, to a depth of some 200 mm, was closely similar in composition to the upper external erosion deposits. Below this was a quite different material; a red-brown ashy silt apparently derived from domestic midden and containing pottery fragments and numerous charcoal flecks. This was preserved up to a depth of 0.85 m and overlay a darker brown sandy silt which was not fully excavated.

Under these deposits, and in the centre of the secondary wall-core was revealed a substantial angular boulder, too large to expose fully in the trench, with measurements in excess of 0.7 m by 0.4 m by 0.25 m (illus 7). This was significantly larger than any of the stones used in the construction of the secondary wall, and clearly not bedrock: its position under the core and set back from the inner wall-face suggested that, rather than being part of the secondary wall, the latter was built over it. The implication, therefore, is that it formed part of a massively built stone structure pre-dating the wheelhouse. Assuming this to be the case, the wheelhouse wall seems to have been built and faced slightly in from the original face, thus reducing the internal diameter of the building.

East from the wheelhouse wall the erosion deposits could be seen to bank up against a further series of deposits which appear to form a slight mound or rise external to the secondary wheelhouse wall (illus 7). These deposits comprise a series of compact dark sandy silts with a combined depth of at least 200 mm (they

could not be fully excavated). The position of these deposits shows that they could not have derived directly from erosion of the secondary wheelhouse wall. They may, therefore, derive from an unexcavated and unrecorded feature to the east, or they may possibly mark the position of an outer wall of the primary structure; the latter interpretation is supported by the position of the deposits, and would suggest that the primary structure was formed of two concentric walls. The lack of obvious stone content, however, means that this cannot be demonstrated conclusively in this area of the site.

Interpretation

The wheelhouse appears to have been constructed by clearing out and remodelling an already abandoned and significantly reduced stone building. The internal occupation deposits were scoured, heaped onto the residual walls, and faced with angular stones to create a near-vertical inner wall-face on a slightly reduced diameter; while the outer wall-face may have been a less formal revetment (although the conditions of preservation are such that this cannot be demonstrated conclusively).

While there is some evidence for an earlier massive-walled structure, and the evidence for a double-walled construction is at least hinted at in the excavated section, there is insufficient evidence to categorize conclusively the earlier building. Limitations of time had dictated that a rather poorly preserved stretch of wall was chosen for re-excavation. With hindsight a clearer picture of the earlier structure would probably have come from the more upstanding parts of the walling where there is surface evidence of intra-mural galleries and cells.

While some of the more massive stones from the original structure may have been used to create the wheelhouse piers, it appears that the wheelhouse wall was built of smaller stones. This might suggest, along with the residual state of at least part of the wall circuit of the earlier structure, that most of the massive stones had already been removed from the site prior to the construction of the wheelhouse. An alternative explanation, however, might be that the earlier structure was unfinished.

After the abandonment of the wheelhouse, the wall seems to have collapsed (or been pulled) outwards, creating a mound of material abutting the lower courses of the external wall/revetment. It is impossible to tell, from the limited area of re-excavation, when this might have occurred and whether occupation might have continued elsewhere on the site after the collapse of the wheelhouse (*perhaps in the maze of cellular structures visible on the surface*).

Local traditions recorded by Beveridge (1911, 207) suggest that the site was thoroughly robbed of its remaining stone in the 19th century to build the nearby bridge over the outlet from Loch nan Clachan, and it is probable that a large quantity of collapsed stonework was removed from the interior at this point (assuming that the wheelhouse was constructed in the usual fashion by corbelling of the bays, there would have been a substantial amount of collapsed stone in its interior). Stone may also have been dug out of the peripheral areas of the mound at this time, possibly disturbing some of the upper external deposits.

FINDS

A handful of the finds from Beveridge's excavations at Eilean Maleit are illustrated in the excavation report (1911) and some, including most of those illustrated, survive in the Beveridge Collection in the National Museum of Scotland (cat nos GT 54–8, 253, and 595–617). Some of the decorated pottery (GT 54–8) was drawn by Mrs C M Piggott and copies of the drawings are held in the National Monuments Record of Scotland. It is likely, however, that the surviving



ILLUS 8 Pottery from Eilean Maleit photographed by Erskine Beveridge and originally published in *North Uist* (1911)

finds represent only a very small proportion of the material originally excavated from the site. Beveridge summarized the material as follows:

Hammer-stones were scarce at Eilean Maleit, but one deserves special notice. This is composed of hornblende, and, besides showing marks of considerable use upon its ends, has a symmetrical groove at the middle of each side where it was evidently hafted. Many fragments of ancient pottery were found, several of them ornamented by various patterns, one piece being perforated near its rim by a small hole, clearly for the purpose of suspension. A lump of pumice is to be noted; as also a thin disc of schist, an inch and a quarter in diameter, which shows distinct evidence of its edges having been chipped to shape (1911, 209).

In the absence of any contextual information there is little that can be usefully added about this material other than to highlight the broad characteristics of the ceramic assemblage.

The range of hand-made fabrics is typical of the Hebridean Iron Age but the quantity and condition of the surviving sherds does not permit any assessment of the range of forms originally present in the assemblage. One of the surviving sherds was perforated (GT 55, *illus 8*, upper middle).

The decorative motifs comprise principally applied wavy cordons: GT 54 has two such cordons, one around its neck, below a short everted rim, and one lower down (*illus 8*, extreme left). The form and the pattern and distribution of decoration closely parallel vessels from Phase 2 at Cnip (MacSween, *in prep*) and probably dates to the early centuries AD, although similar double cordons are found on much later, probably sixth-century AD flaring rim vessels in Phase 3

at Eilean Olabhat, also in North Uist (Armit, Campbell & Dunwell, forthcoming). Another sherd (GT 58, illus 9, bottom right) has part of an applied circle or band and is closely paralleled by a sherd from the Allasdale wheelhouse in Barra (Young 1953, 96, no 80).

The other sherd of note from Beveridge's collection is GT 56, where a series of incised infilled triangles is visible above an applied cordon which appears to mark the widest part of the vessel (the sherd is shown upside down on the upper right of Beveridge's photograph, illus 8). This type of motif is particularly common in the Period B1 assemblage at the nearby Sollas wheelhouse, which dates to the early centuries AD (Campbell 1991, eg vessel 232).

Finds from the 1995 excavations were restricted to a small pottery assemblage (53 sherds), one piece of ferrous slag from the wheelhouse wall core, and one piece of pumice from the topsoil. The pottery comprised generally small, abraded and undiagnostic sherds but also included two body sherds with fine applied wavy cordons; one from the wheelhouse wall core and another from the truncated pit in the interior. These sherds would suggest a date range similar to the material from Beveridge's excavations. A notable concentration of pottery (21 sherds, ie almost half of the total assemblage) was found within the truncated pit in the interior of the structure, in a deposit reminiscent of the votive pits in the floor of the wheelhouse at Sollas (Campbell, *ibid*). No bone or other organic material was recovered. Further details of the pottery from 1995 excavations can be found in the archive report (Armit 1997).

The decorated sherds appear to indicate that there was some occupation of the site during the later centuries BC and/or early centuries AD. The pottery characteristics cannot, however, be used to date the chronological limits of the site sequence even approximately: the apparent absence of later pottery, for example, may simply indicate that less obviously interesting or attractive material was not collected or retained and need not mean that occupation did not extend into the immediately pre-Norse period.

DISCUSSION

The recent work at Eilean Maleit has considerably expanded the information available from earlier records. The wheelhouse has been shown definitively to be a secondary construction and to have been a fairly poorly constructed building relative to other wheelhouses in the vicinity. Its small size and irregular shape suggest that, although it could have supported a superstructure similar to (though smaller than) that of grander wheelhouses, like that at nearby Sollas, it is unlikely ever to have reached the same height and degree of monumentality: nonetheless, even comparably small wheelhouses like that at Cnip in Lewis would have had roofs up to 5 m above their floors and were clearly far from simple, utilitarian buildings (Armit, in prep).

It is impossible to say, at present, what such structural variation might have meant in terms of social or perhaps chronological distinction between these sites. The finds assemblage, while not especially copious or distinctive, suggests a broad contemporaneity between Eilean Maleit and other excavated wheelhouses in the last centuries BC and early centuries AD, although the absence of contextual information from the early excavations prevents any definitive attribution of particular finds to particular phases of occupation.

It is also clear from the re-excavation that the wheelhouse at Eilean Maleit was set into an already ruined (or, less likely, unfinished) structure, probably built of massive angular stones. Little else can be said, however, about this earlier structure from the limited excavations carried out, although the evidence is consistent with the initial hypothesis that it was a massive-walled Atlantic roundhouse. The apparent presence of intra-mural features at Eilean Maleit and at the two neighbouring wheelhouses, an interpretation strengthened by the re-survey, certainly suggests

attribution to this class of monument. On the basis of its relatively small size and the irregularity of shape imposed by the site topography, it was, however, almost certainly not a classic broch tower.

The highly fragmentary state of this earlier structure, at the time when the wheelhouse was built, suggests either the passage of a considerable period of time between the occupation of the two structures, or perhaps that the earlier structure was never completed. The presence of pre-wheelhouse midden and occupation traces tends to support the first hypothesis, although such extreme denudation of the earlier structure at so early a period is quite unexpected and difficult to parallel.

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