

Hebridean Gaels and the sea in the early 19th century: ‘the streaming ocean of the roadways’

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ABSTRACT

The people of the Hebrides have long been associated with a heroic tradition of seafaring – the image of the medieval birlinn or galley has become emblematic of Norse and Gaelic power. Coastal communities in the 19th century would have been familiar with this tradition as it was a common theme of the song and story which was a ubiquitous part of their lives. However, the waters around the Hebrides in the years around 1800 were largely the preserve of merchantmen or warships of friendly and enemy navies. Gaels who farmed the coasts of the Hebrides could have little influence over this largely English-speaking maritime world of international trade and global conflict in the surrounding seas, although it had profound and wide-ranging impacts on their daily lives.

By drawing on a case study from Loch Aoineart, South Uist, this paper seeks to consider some aspects of how Gaelic-speaking coastal communities interacted with the sea. Whilst this article will serve as an introduction to some common archaeological features relating to post-medieval coastal life, it is intended to encourage archaeologists to consider the sea as part of a wider Gaelic cultural landscape. It will also argue that critical use of evidence for the Gaelic oral tradition is vital to an understanding of life in the period. This study draws on the rich and varied evidence available for the early 19th century, but it is hoped that its conclusions may be of interest to those studying coastal communities in earlier periods where the archaeological record provides little evidence.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

The spelling and orthographic conventions used for Scots Gaelic material in this paper are based on recent historical work in the subject area by a Gaelic-speaking author (MacCoinnich 2015: XX) and the SQA Gaelic Orthographic Conventions (SQA 2009). In general, place-names are given in Gaelic as they appear on the most recent editions of the Ordnance Survey maps of the areas. Names which appear only in historic sources have occasionally been rendered into modern Gaelic orthography with reference to dictionaries (Dwelly 1993; Mark 2003). I am grateful to Dr Martin MacGregor and an anonymous reviewer for further assistance in translation of place-names. When citing from Gaelic sources, the original Gaelic will be given first. All direct quotations and their respective

translations are rendered as they appear in the original source.

INTRODUCTION AND APPROACH

*Athair, a chruthaich an fhairge
'S gach gaoth a shèideas às gach àird,
Beannaich ar caol-bhàirc 's ar gaisgich,
'S cum i fhèin 's a gasraidh slàn.*

O Father, you who formed the ocean and every wind
that blows from every direction, bless our narrow
bark
and our champion heroes and keep herself and her
crew in good health.

– From *Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill*,
the Galley of Clanranald, Alasdair Mac
Mhaighstir Alasdair (Barr 2010: 1)

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These words are drawn from *Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill* (the Galley of Clanranald) by Alasdair Mhaighstir Alasdair (Dressler & Stiùbhart 2012). It is considered the first ‘epic’ of vernacular Gaelic literature (Black 2001: 470) and perhaps one of ‘the greatest sea poem[s] written in the British Isles’ (Bray 1986: 1936). Composed in the mid-18th century (Black 2001: 470), it remains well known in Gaelic oral tradition. In 2012, a local *Deasach* (an inhabitant of South Uist) proudly pointed out to me where the galley from the poem was reportedly drawn up for the winter. For the people of Loch Aoinart at the start of the 19th century, *Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill* must have been in stark contrast with their own experience. The vessels which then plied Loch Aoinart were largely merchantmen collecting kelp, an important industrial product derived from seaweed. In earlier times the sea had been ‘*cuan sruthach nan ròd*’, ‘the streaming ocean of the roadways’, a highway which connected the people of Gaeldom (MacInnes 2006a: 469), but for many living along the coasts in the early 19th century it was a capricious, often unforgiving, element in an already harsh and precarious way of life. However, the sea also provided economic opportunities and a way to supplement subsistence agriculture which often failed to provide for the needs of their communities. It remained an important subject in song and story which was a ubiquitous part of their lives.

The archaeological remains of the kelp industry and other aspects of the coastal archaeological record have been the subject of papers which consider them from a typological (Bannerman & Jones 1999; Benjamin et al 2014), technical (Bathgate 1949; Dawson 2004; Hale 2004) or historical point of view (Bumsted 2005). Fishing and exploitation of the marine environment have also been the subject of ethnographic or folk-life approaches (Cerón-Carrasco 2011); whilst within historical and Gaelic studies the sea has been a common theme in considerations of the cultural landscape (MacInnes 2006a; Newton 2009; Stiùbhart 2017). However, with the notable exception of Lelong (2000: 220–3), there have been few attempts to draw together these disparate

elements to consider the *experience* of inhabiting a marine landscape at any particular place and time. This paper will present a brief account of life in Loch Aoinart’s marine landscape in the first two decades of the 19th century, exploring some of the ways in which the sea influenced people’s lives and experiences. This paper draws on wider research into landscape archaeologies of the post-medieval *Gàidhealtachd*, the traditionally Gaelic-speaking parts of Scotland (Grant 2016), and is intended primarily to illustrate the method of that research, suggesting how archaeologists might examine cultural seascapes and landscapes within Gaeldom. As a result, this paper does not explore in detail the communities of South Uist in the period or their politics and history. A detailed study of the archaeology of early 19th-century kelping in Loch Aoinart will be presented elsewhere (Grant forthcoming) and contains a more local and specific consideration of Loch Aoinart than is given here.

A key part of the approach is the critical use of evidence from Gaelic culture and from local oral tradition. Many coastal activities leave no archaeological evidence. As was evocatively expressed by Olivia Lelong, the sea, unlike the land, ‘cannot be inscribed with the scars of the plough ... but swallows up all man-made objects placed within it’ (Lelong 2000: 222). Many mundane acts of coastal living rarely feature in archival material. This means that the oral tradition is a crucial source of evidence. For example, poetry from the Hebrides provides some of the only first-hand accounts of the experience of cutting seaweed in the post-medieval period (MacDhòmhnaill 2001: 81). Place-names are particularly important as they often encoded local knowledge and traditions in the landscape. As with other forms of evidence, the oral tradition must be used critically. Song, story and verse were ubiquitous to life in Gaeldom but the tradition is complex and multifaceted – as are the mechanisms of its survival. The availability and character of the surviving evidence varies considerably in character from place to place. A consideration of how this may be approached critically by the archaeologists

is in print elsewhere (Grant 2014). A facility with the Gaelic language would certainly be of great use here; for example, for exploring the extensive Gaelic-language ethnographic material collected by the School of Scottish Studies in the Hebrides. For those without Gaelic, such as the author, there are extensive collections of translated material, often with highly illustrative notes (Ó Baoill 1994; Black 2001; Meek 2003), as well as scholarly works on interpreting and understanding Gaelic culture (Black 2005; Newton 2006, 2009). The use of evidence from Gaelic tradition here is, however, more than just about data gathering; it allows a glimpse into a complex world of cultural meaning and symbolism.

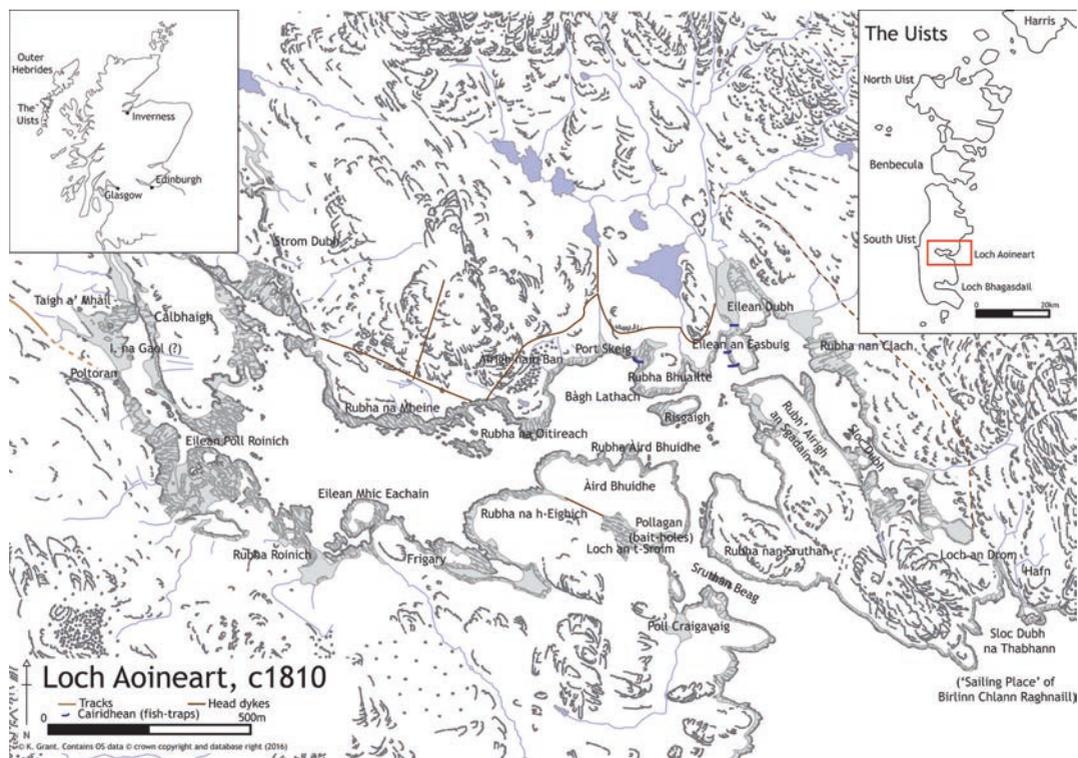
Tales, imagery and metaphor related to the sea are ubiquitous in Gaelic poetry (Maclean 1985: 83–105; Fomin & MacMathúna 2015). These range from high-status praise poems, which see the galley as a prestige object and a symbol of the ‘ship of state’ of the clan (Black 2001: 471), to a large corpus of song and verse in the vernacular about drownings, to which Loch Aoineart has sadly added some fine examples (Shaw 1977: 102–5; MacDonald 1999: 161–7). A long tradition of seafaring in Gaeldom has meant the language has a rich vocabulary of terms relating to the sea and seafaring and is permeated with expressions which are marine in origin (MacLeod 2005). To give just a single example; ‘*eathar ùr is seana chreagan*’ (‘a new boat and old rocks’) is an expression translated as meaning ‘youthful folly will flounder’, ‘suggestive of a thousand tragedies beyond the mere literal translation’ (Dwelly 1993: 387). Cultural meaning and symbolism were an important aspect of people’s lives and their relationship with the landscape, and it is argued here that it is crucial to understanding the impact of the sea on their cultural life.

CASE STUDY – LOCH AOINEART IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY

This paper will examine life in the coastal communities of Loch Aoineart in the first decade of the 19th century. The loch lies on the east

coast of the Hebridean island of South Uist, an island whose communities were undergoing great change in the period. The end of the 18th century had seen a population boom on the islands which the economy of the time struggled to support (Parker Pearson et al 2004: 172–4). The result was economic hardship and resulting widespread famine and ill-health. This, combined with attractive prospects for gaining land through military service (MacKillop 2012) and evictions and discrimination brought about by religious intolerance (Bumsted 1982: 366; Parker Pearson et al 2004: 175; Grant forthcoming), served to encourage emigration in the latter half of the 18th century (MacLean 2012: 359). A boom in the kelp industry, particularly from the 1790s, had a transformative effect on the way of life and pattern of landholding as the estate of MacDonald of Clanranald, the feudal superior of South Uist, was reordered in order to maximise profits (Parker Pearson et al 2004: 173; MacLean 2012: 368). The estate began actively resisting emigration to ensure a large workforce remained in the islands (Bumsted 2005: 123).

During this period, Loch Aoineart was the principal port of the Uists, a powerhouse of Clanranald, complete with a cart road and inn. The ruins of numerous dwellings, jetties and platforms are testament to comings and goings in the past, and have made it the subject of repeated archaeological attention (Parker Pearson et al 2004: 172–3; MacLean 2012: 365; Moreland & MacLean 2012; Benjamin et al 2014). A group of surveys by William Bald on behalf of the local landowners, published from 1805 (Bald 1805a, 1805b, 1829), capture a snapshot of the landscape in that period (Moreland & MacLean 2012: 93). MacDonald’s *General View of the Agriculture of the Hebrides* of 1811 is particularly informative with regard to agricultural practice. Documentary evidence in the form of the Clanranald papers in the National Records of Scotland (NRS GD201) is of enormous utility in understanding both the economics of life there and the key personalities involved. The oral historical record for this period is also rich, with surviving poems from the mid-18th to early 19th century (Bray 1986: 122; Grant 2014: 37–9) and excellent collections of Gaelic song, poetry and prose from the 19th



ILLUS 1 Map showing location of Loch Aoineart and places around the lochside. Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right (2016)

and 20th centuries (Campbell 1860; Carmichael 1971; Shaw 1977; MacDonald 1991; MacLellan 1997; Campbell 1999). The work of traditional bards in the community in the early 20th century provides insight into more recent Gaelic views of the Uists (Mac an t-Saoir 1968; Dòmhnall Ruadh Choruna 1969; MacDonald 1999; Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin 2000; MacDhòmhnail 2001). While we cannot equate life in the early 20th century with that of the early 19th, these more recent accounts provide an evocative commentary in authentic voices from South Uist and encode older communal traditions and memory. A more detailed appraisal of the surviving evidence for South Uist, including the evidence from the oral tradition, can be found elsewhere (Grant 2016: 82–90).

South Uist's landscapes were, like most of the Gaelic-speaking parts of Scotland, comprised

of small townships whose occupants were largely concerned with subsistence agriculture and seeking ways to secure extra income to pay rents (Grant 1960: 15–35, MacInnes 2006b: 1–29). On Loch Aoineart, around 20 small settlements spread on both sides of the loch are likely to have been home to a population in the low hundreds. In the early 19th century, these subsistence communities around the loch were being replaced by pendicles, parcels of land allocated to a sole tenant, a form of land-holding intended primarily to increase kelp yields (MacLean 2012: 367). Whilst fishing on a commercial scale was taking place in various locations on the west of Scotland, this was limited on the Uists, although the islands still supplied crews and vessels to the fleets which plied the surrounding waters (MacDonald 1811: 539). By drawing on the extensive documentary sources available, this



ILLUS 2 Aerial view of Loch Aoineart from the east, the seaward side. The landscape of Loch Aoineart is one of steep hills, narrow channels, dog-legs, islands and skerries. Settlement now, as in the early 19th century, is along the shoreline. © HES, Crown Copyright

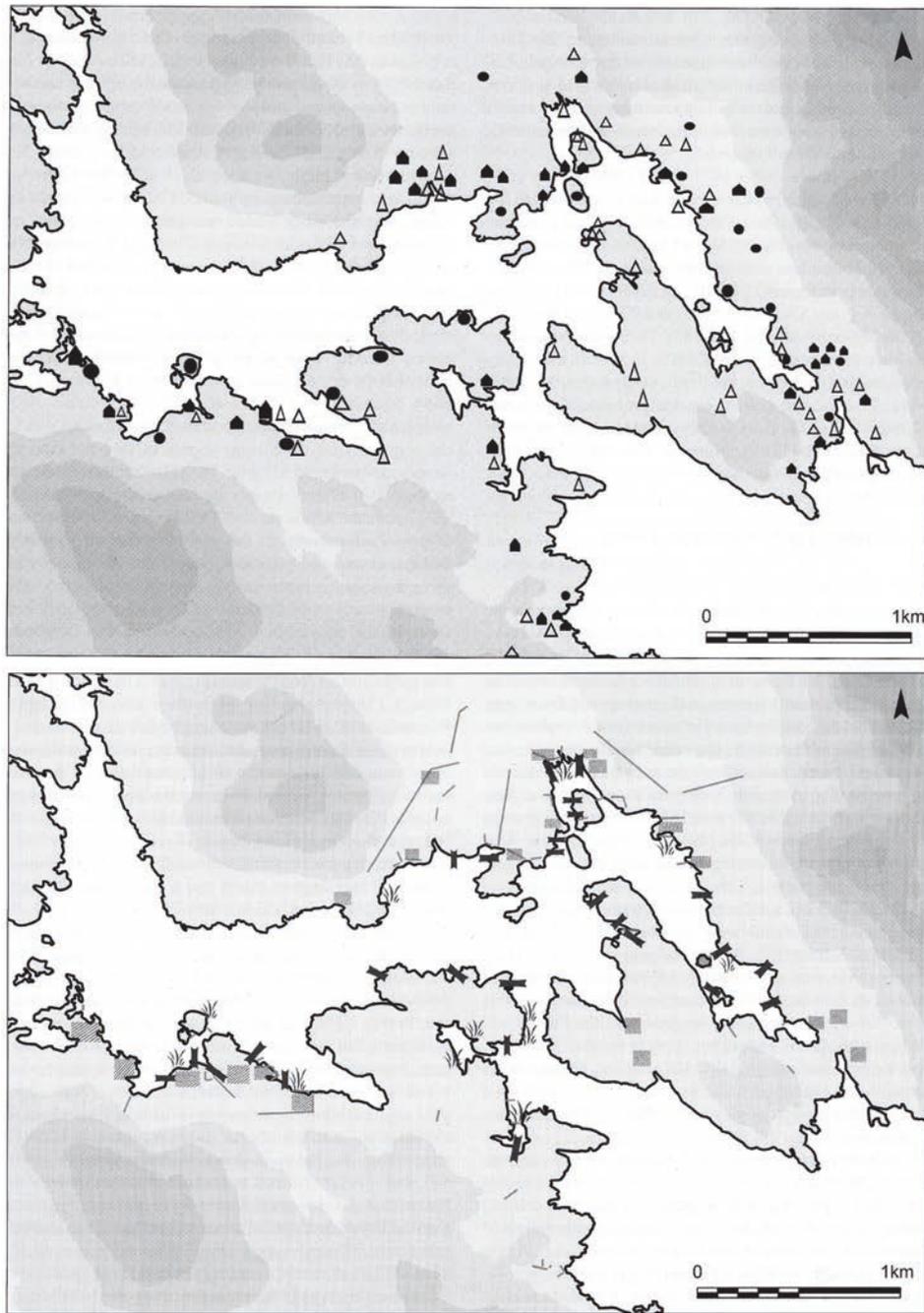
case study considers Loch Aoineart at this very particular time, around the first decade of the 19th century. It presents a series of examples of the complex ways in which the sea influenced the lives of the people who lived there.

LANDING PLACES, BOATS AND SHIPS

The intertidal zone of Loch Aoineart is littered with archaeological features. Amongst these, structures designed to allow for the landing of boats are perhaps the most common. These range from the substantial wharf at Port Skeig (Canmore ID 351350), which may have been large enough to load ocean-going vessels, to a small landing place comprised of two small parallel lines of stones on the beach at Eilean Dubh. Numerous terms have been used in English to describe this varied set of features,

including port, jetty, pier and slipway (Moreland & MacLean 2012: 91–4) just as there are many words in Gaelic which describe subtle differences between various kinds of landing places (Dwelly 1993: 155). The number of harbours, anchorages and landing places across the Hebrides in the early 19th century was worthy of comment in contemporary accounts: ‘these coasts, amounting to three thousand nine hundred and fifty miles in length, contain a vast number of harbours of every description’ (MacDonald 1811: 55–6). Although some of these various landing places, jetties and quays could be earlier, their close physical association with settlements dating to the 18th and 19th centuries and structures related to kelping suggest that many date to this period.

The exact nature of the vessels that used these landing places is hard to ascertain. In his *A General View of the Agriculture of the Hebrides or Western Islands of Scotland*, MacDonald,



ILLUS 3 Maps showing structures found around Loch Aoinart during systematic survey by the SEARCH project (Moreland & MacLean 2012: 94–5). The upper map shows houses (house symbol), cairns (triangles) and other structures (dots). The lower shows seaweed platforms, jetties, walls and *feannagan* around the Loch. They show the close relationship between settlement and evidence of exploitation of the marine environment and give an impression of the coastal nature of the archaeological record. © John Moreland



ILLUS 4a and 4b Examples of landing places of various sizes and characters from across Loch Aoinart





ILLUS 4c Example of landing places of various sizes and characters from across Loch Aoineart

with typical exactitude, states that the fisheries and kelp trade of the Hebrides used ‘2,562 boats and vessels of every description and for some months in the year 10,500 sailors’ (MacDonald 1811: 538). Dwelly’s Gaelic dictionary lists nearly 40 different kinds of vessel (not including different regional words for each), ranging from *long*, a square-rigged vessel of three or four masts, to *slaod uisge*, a simple raft (Dwelly 1993: 78). In comments on the text of a recent reworking of *Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill*, Alan Riach (2015) draws attention to the fact that the word *birlinn*, suggestive of a later medieval galley like that used by the Lords of the Isles, only became appended to the poem’s title in the late Victorian period. He further notes that it is used only once, where the words *long* and *bàrc* are used three times and *iubhrach* once (Riach 2015: 2). All three of these words suggest a post-medieval square-rigged or fore-and-aft-rigged vessel, such as a cutter or sloop (Dwelly 1993: 79). This suggests that rather than harking back

to the ancient galleys of the days of the Lords of the Isles, the poet was drawing on his own experience of contemporary vessels, using terms that listeners would understand and could readily imagine. It also suggests that a variety of modern ocean-going vessels were to be found in and around Loch Aoineart.

It was in ferrying kelp to one of these larger vessels that Aonghas Òg Àirigh Mhuilinn, tacksman of a nearby township, lost his life, as is recorded in the song *Marbhrann do dh’fear Àirigh Mhuilinn*:

*Ach bha an uair air a cumail,
Bha gaoth is sruth mar an ciand’ an
A chuir thairis an t-eathar,
Mo chreach! mu leathach an lionaidh*

The appointed hour was kept,
the wind and tide were both there to overturn the
vessel,
alas, about the middle of the flood-tide.

Shaw 1977: 103

Although we must of course consider poetic license, the choice of the word *eathar* is illustrative of what vessels would have been used for such activities. The word suggests a small boat with a pointed bow and stern (Mark 2003: 253), a description that seems to match that of the *sgoth* – the archetypal Hebridean open boat. These vessels were pointed at both ends and could range up to 11m in length, with a maximum crew of six or seven (Cerón-Carrasco 2011: 61–2). *Sgothan* (pl) were used extensively for fishing in Lewis in the 19th century as they were large and sturdy enough to brave the seas around the Hebrides but could also be hauled up or landed easily on a beach.

These would be ideal for the loading of ships in Loch Aoineart: they had plenty of storage space, could take a reasonably large crew, and were sturdy enough to navigate the rocks and currents of the loch and venture outside. Such a vessel would be beyond the financial reach of any individual tenant, especially given the scarcity of appropriate wood in the Hebrides, and was perhaps provided by larger ships or brought to the loch and hired or crewed for the kelping by the local elite – such as ill-fated Aonghas Òg. Recent archaeological work on the Uists has suggested that natural waterways were occasionally canalised to allow access from small inland lochans to the open sea, creating ‘ports’. These have been found in association with late 18th-century tacksmen’s houses and may demonstrate that such individuals had access to sea-going vessels (MacDonald & Rennell 2012; Angus 2016: 72). For ordinary people, if they had a boat at all, it was likely to be a *geòla*, or yawl, a small open boat used for inshore fishing across the Northern and Western Isles, usually crewed by two or three (Cerón-

Carrasco 2011: 61–2). The Gaelic phrase ‘*eathar anns a’ bruthaich*’ meaning a vessel secured in winter quarters, literally means a vessel on the ascent, or slope (Dwelly 1993: 132); such vessels were ‘pulled up’ for storage during winter. A small landing place in a tidal cove just north-west of Eilean Dubh on the north side of the loch is probably a perfect example of where a small *geòla* could have been pulled up. It comprises two lines of boulders defining an area of stony beach which has been cleared of large stones,



ILLUS 5 Sketch of what is described as a ‘scaff’, likely a *sgoth*, by Seòras Chaluim Sheòrais who fished the waters off Benbecula at the start of the 20th century (MacLeod 2005: 61). © George MacLeod, Acair

giving it the appearance of a ‘landing strip’. Ethnographic accounts from the 19th century in Lewis suggest that fishermen preferred beaching vessels on shingle as it made the task easier (Cerón-Carrasco 2011). This small landing place would therefore create a clear area of shingle where boats could be pulled up for storage on dry land, marked by two lines of stones that would make it visible even at high tides. This structure would likely be no more than the work of half an hour for a boat’s crew of two or three to build, and is typical of most of the landing places around the loch – redolent of everyday use of the loch by



ILLUS 6 Landing place by Eilean Dubh, North Loch Aoinart



ILLUS 7 Wharf at Port Skeig, named on Bald's map of 1805

small boats whose crew knew every aspect of the microtopography of the lochside.

It is well established that Loch Aoineart was South Uist's principal harbour for much of the post-medieval period (Parker Pearson et al 2004: 133), although only one sizable historical quayside can be identified, that at Port Skeig. It may well be that ocean-going vessels were often restricted to the outer loch due to navigational hazards, and so would leave little archaeological trace. However, the substantial ships that used the loch are well attested in the correspondence of Robert Brown, briefly factor for Clanranald in South Uist around 1800. His papers name several of the vessels and contain a note from his kelp surveyor indicating that he oversaw the loading of 100 tons of kelp in the loch in one occasion in 1800, when the vessel lay 'riding at anchor in the harbour of Loch Eynort' (NRAS 2177/1508–10).

Two of these vessels, the *Delight*, of 57 tons, and the *Jean*, 62 tons, were both sloops: single decked, single masted, fore-and-aft-rigged vessels commonly used in the early 19th century for transporting goods in inland waters. Both were fairly new – only four and two years old respectively – and operated primarily out of Leith (Lloyd's 1800: 100, 205). Though small compared to naval vessels or transatlantic traders of the day, they were significantly bigger than the vernacular open boats of the Hebrides such as the *sgoth* or *geòla*, and were capable of making long voyages. The vessels that left Loch Aoineart with a cargo of kelp at the end of summer were destined for Liverpool, Hull, Leith or Newcastle, voyages which would require traversing the dangerous waters of the Minch and, in the case of the latter three, undertaking a circumnavigation around the north of Scotland.

The vessels were there through the personal business connections of Robert Brown, which

he exercised through extensive correspondence with his agent Robert Anderson in Edinburgh, the man who arranged buyers and ships for the island's kelp. On at least one occasion, Brown himself arranged for two small sloops (about half the tonnage of those already mentioned) to come from Greenock when Anderson could not arrange shipping, demonstrating he had his own connections and contacts to draw on (NRAS 2177/1508–10). Given their home ports, such large vessels were visitors rather than inhabitants of the landscape, crewed largely by outsiders. At the start of the 19th century, the Minch was a place of cross-cultural Atlantic trade, where commercial fishing vessels could encounter



ILLUS 8 Humber sloop 'Harry', perhaps similar to the sloops that visited Loch Aoineart at the start of the 19th century. © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

foreign traders, warships and privateers (Stiùbhart 2017). Whilst those living on the lochside were likely to have knowledge of and personal connections in this world, they could wield little power or influence in it – such vessels would arrive and depart the loch at the behest of the estate elite and were outwith the control of ordinary people.

The landing places on the lochside and the vessels that used them show how access to the sea was an important way in which the hierarchical nature of Gaelic, and indeed wider British, society was performed and understood.

The chief's factors and agents could use their economic connections to arrange pick up from the large ocean-going vessels of the English-speaking Lowlands and the wider British Isles, while a tacksman could, perhaps, muster a crew for and gain access to a *sgoth*, or even own one himself. The various landing places associated with small settlements suggest that tenants may have had the use of a small yawl for fishing, kelping and travel around the loch. The cottar (a landless labourer), assuming his lowly position in society was also expressed here, may have had a part share in the use of a boat or, more likely, nothing. Sloops such as the *Delight* were a real-life *Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill*: the image of a ship used in the poem was a widely known allegory for the power of the clan, with the chief holding the tiller (Black 2001: 471). Although these vessels were not owned by the clan but were part of a wider network of mercantile trade, their association with the local elite was not just economic reality but also the expression of widely understood cultural and symbolic understandings of the ship as an expression of power and status.

These cultural allusions to the elite of the sea were not restricted to Loch Aoineart's Gaelic-speaking inhabitants. In July 1800, a John Buchanan wrote from Edinburgh to Robert Brown asking him to 'remember I made you an Admiral, I hope of the RED' [original emphasis] (NRAS 2177/1508–10). It is not clear what the relationship between Buchanan and Brown was, although they were both deeply involved in the kelp industry, but the style of their letters suggests long acquaintance. The letter was sent shortly after Brown's appointment as factor and it may be that Buchanan is implying that he had some role in Brown's securing it. The letter's stress on an 'Admiral of the Red' refers to the position of Admiral of the Fleet, the most senior position in the Royal Navy. In the same letter Buchanan urges Brown to remember that 'kelp is our sheet anchor' (NRAS 2177/1508–10), sheet anchor being a naval expression meaning 'a person or thing to be relied upon in times of emergency' (CED 2003). There is a pleasing symmetry to the fact that whilst the Gaelic of those working the kelp coasts was

suffused with marine expressions, the English of the estate elite appears to have been equally marine.

DANGER, NAVIGATION, PLACE-NAMES, AND SEAMARKS

With the open oceans being largely the preserve of traders and professional mariners, coastal fishing was an important way in which many Gaels interacted with the sea. However, these voyages leave little archaeological evidence beyond the landing places where the vessels were pulled up. The experience of using and manning the vessels on the water itself can also be considered by drawing on place-names and the local oral tradition.

The seas around the Hebrides can be capricious. Making a living from the sea was always more risky than agriculture (Cerón-Carrasco 2011: 61). In Loch Aoineart, the oral tradition is particularly rich in the description of drownings and marine disasters, from the death of Aonghas Òg in 1809 up to the 20th century. In 1937, three men were drowned when fishing in Loch Aoineart, inspiring a poem of loss from a local bard (MacDonald 1999: 218). Although it was written well over 100 years after the period under discussion, it is notable for revisiting the classic themes and images of such poems in lament of those who died at sea from previous centuries (Maclean 1985: 96–9). Namely, the tragedy of young life cut off in its prime, the unexpectedness of such incidents, the sense of loss for those left behind and the apparent cruelty and indifference of the sea:

Chan ionann sin is fear a shlàint'
A' dol air àrainn lòin,
'S a chùl a chur ri dhachaigh bhlàth
Le aoibhneas, gràdh is ceòl;
Gun smaointinn dhaibh 'n àm dealachaidh
Air beannachd no air pòig,
Is cuing a' bhàis a' teannachadh
Na h-analach na shròin.

O chuain gun bhàidh, nach gabh thu fois
'S nach leig thu osnadh throm;
Dèan gàirdeachas ri daoine bochd

*A dh'fhàg thu nochd cho lom;
Chreach thu an seann duine bha liath
Is an cìocharan beag fann,
Is bidh do ghàire dhaibh na phian
An cian a bhios iad ann.*

[After a description of a person dying in bed after a long illness]

That is not at all like a man in full health,
Going to look for food,
And leaving his happy home
Full of joy, love and music;
Without even thinking of a blessing
Or a kiss at time of parting,
While death's yoke was already constricting
The breath of life in his nostrils.

O merciless ocean, why don't you take some rest
And take a deep breath of repose;
You can rejoice over the unhappy people
Whom you have caused tonight to be bereft;
You dispossessed the grey-haired old man
And the helpless infant at the breast
And the sound of your laughter will be a source of
pain for them
As long as they live.

MacDonald 1999: 165–7

Drownings were so common that the image of looking out to sea for a lost boat became an indication of tragedy, disquiet and anguish, even if it had nothing to do with drowning (Maclean 1985: 96–7). A sense of danger must always have been present when boats were used but the influx of people from the arable lands to the west caused by kelping may have meant that people with a limited familiarity with boats would also have been present, increasing the risks.

One of the ways in which this risk was managed was through careful navigation. In the rock- and skerry-strewn channels of Loch Aoineart, a detailed knowledge of the marine landscape (in this case literally the physical landscape beneath the sea's surface) was essential to remain safe. *Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill* contains an extended passage describing the role of each member of the crew, and has this to say about a look-out who would serve as navigator:

*Dh'òrdaicheadh don toiseach fear-eòlais.
Èireadh màirnealach 'na sheasamh
Suas don toiseach*

*'S dèanadh e dhuinn eòlas seasmhach
Cala a choisneas,
Glacadh e comharra-tìre
Le sàr shùil-bheachd,
On 's esan as dia gach sìde
Is reul-iùil duinn.*

Look-out is ordered to the front.

Let a mariner rise up at the front and let him set up
for
us reliable information about reaching a harbour ...

Let him catch land marks with real visual
observation,
Because he is a full weather-god for us and a
guiding star.

Barr 2010: 7

The translation of *fear-eòlais* as 'look-out' in the above passage is probably not correct. While *fear* certainly means a man, *eòlais* translates as knowledge, intelligence or familiarity (Dwelly 1993: 394; Mark 2003: 263). '*Fear-eòlais*' is therefore not someone looking for dangers, but someone who is already knowledgeable and familiar with them: a pilot, not a lookout. On South Uist, *Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill* is actually known as Clanranald's *Sgiobaireachd* or navigation (Black 2001: 470). The two names represent starkly different understandings of the poem. The *birlinn* is an ancient bardic symbol of the prestige of the Lords of the Isles appended to the poem during the romantic Victorian period, while the *Sgiobaireachd* is a technical achievement of seafaring which a Uist audience would fully understand and appreciate, knowing the waters in question.

One of the key ways in which this knowledge about the marine landscape was understood and transmitted is through place-names. The Gaelic language has a huge number of topographic terms for coastal and marine features (Murray 2014: 77–84). Loch Aoineart's place-names are no exception (MacLean 1989; Moreland & MacLean 2012).

A majority of the place-names on Loch Aoineart known from cartographic and documentary evidence from the period are at least partly maritime in character. Some relate purely to features and would clearly be of aid to navigators. *Sruthan Beag*, which can be translated as the small current, is at the narrow

entrance to the loch where the current rushes on either side of the tide (MacLeod 2005: 66). The headland bordering it to the north is named for this channel: Rubha nan Sruthan, the ‘Headland of the Current’. Other place-names also refer to navigational hazards: Rubha na Oitireach is a rendering of Rubha na Oitire, the ‘Headland of the Ridge in the sea’, probably referring to a submerged sandbank (Dwelly 1993: 708). The latter is a term which truly sums up Loch Aoineart’s landscape – often both of the sea and the land. Bàgh Lathach describes a muddy bay. This reference to the surface beneath the water is perhaps intended to convey what purchase an anchor may find there, a common aspect of Gaelic coastal place-names (Murray 2014: 78). *Poll* is a common part of a place-name and implies a pool of deep water (Dwelly 1993: 730), perhaps where larger vessels can be sure of a reasonable depth below their keels. *Sloc* similarly implies a pool, hollow, or crevice as we see in Sloc Dubh, the Black Hollow. *Port* in Gaelic is, as in English, a harbour or anchorage although it can be smaller than that implied in the English (Murray 2014: 79). Then there is a procession of headlands, or *rubhaichean*, with their descriptive names: Rubha Roinich, ‘Headland of the Bracken’, Rubha Àird Bhuidhe, the ‘Point of the Yellow Headland’, Rubha nan Clach, ‘Headland of the Stones’, easily recognised from the sea as each is weathered.

On both Lewis and Barra there was a long tradition documented in the 19th and 20th centuries of navigating by using seamarks, a system whereby positions at sea are worked out by aligning certain features on the shore – such as prominent headlands (MacLeod 2005: 105–13; Cerón-Carrasco 2011: 65–6; MacKinnon et al 2012). Such seamarks give us an insight into the way such fishermen saw and understood the seascape. These were not, in general, open-ocean seafarers, but mariners of the local coastline, relying on a deep knowledge of the land to understand the sea. In early 19th-century Barra, when commercial fishing was being encouraged and fishing grounds were scarce, the local community lotted out the sea on an annual basis using seamarks. An ‘admiral’ was appointed on an annual basis to solve disputes (MacDonald

1811: 792). This form of lotting mirrors the traditional run-rig system of land management. The community here was transposing an agriculture-based understanding of landscape on to the sea, drawing on the cultural and social norms of their society to impose order on this new economic element of their lives.

Although many people of Loch Aoineart would have been familiar with boats, they lived in a landscape of agricultural settlements, fields, dykes and grazings – they were people of the land. However, they were also in a sense intertidal, acting along the shore’s edge. These activities leave more tangible archaeological evidence.

At several places around the loch side we find rock-cut or ground hollows on rocky outcrops by the shore. These features, which are common across the Hebrides, are *tuill-sollaidh* or bait-holes, called in South Uist Gaelic *pollagan* (MacDonald 1991: 196). Within these hollows, whelks, cockles and other shellfish were ground up for use as bait (Smith 2012: 398; The Carmichael Watson Project 2012). These holes are generally to be found near *carragean* (pl): rocks jutting out into the sea used in *creagaireachd*, or crag-fishing, and they are commonly associated with a ‘creagan’ place-name component describing this activity (Dwelly 1993: 170; The Carmichael Watson Project 2012). In this practice, short fishing lines, or more commonly nets or baskets known as *tàbhan* (sing *tàbh*), were used to catch fish swimming close to the shore. Commonly, *tàbhan* would be lowered down on a rod into an underwater hollow then bait, crushed in the bait-holes, would be scattered to draw fish into the net (Fenton 1978: 538; Cerón-Carrasco 2011: 60). One of the advantages of crag-fishing is that it requires no specialist materials or expertise. This may have made it ideal for kelpers or crofters who needed to be able to fish occasionally for subsistence.

Some such subsistence fishing probably always took place. Oil for household lamps was often sourced from saithe, one of the most abundant species caught from the shore (Cerón-Carrasco 2011: 69; Smith 2012: 398), but *creagaireachd* may have been particularly associated with occasions when food was scarce, just as it is in the Northern Isles (Fenton 1978:



ILLUS 9 *Pollag* or bait-hole, South Loch Aoineart

533). In the Hebrides, ethnologist Alexander Carmichael recorded a tradition that bait-holes were created by the wife of one of the Lords of the Isles to allow the poor to fish during a time of need (The Carmichael Watson Project 2012). Thirty years after the period under discussion, the minister of South Uist saw crowds of the poor picking cockles, which comprised one of the only sources of food available in years of scarcity (MacLean 1841: 187). There is another reason that such fishing may have often been a ‘last resort’. Within Gaeldom, a highly stratified society, concepts of nobility and status also extended to foods. Game and imported goods were viewed as high status, dairy products and oats as staples, and tubers, shellfish, and scavengers as low status. The eating of shellfish was considered so shameful that in 18th- and 19th-century Gaelic song and poetry, to assert that someone ate shellfish was well understood to be an insult. The expression ‘*tha e air a dhol don fhaochaig*’— ‘he has gone to the whelk-shell’ meant that someone was being stingy or uncharitable (Newton 2009: 185–6). We may therefore see these bait-holes

not, perhaps, as evidence of fishermen choosing to actively engage in sourcing food from the sea, but people of the land being forced to try to gain any food they could to sustain themselves and their families.

Bait-holes themselves are surprisingly substantial. Their character led many antiquarians to question their use and attribute them to prehistory (Sands 1881: 459; Mann 1921–2) despite the fact that they were still being used for fishing as part of what was clearly a long-held tradition. One reason why these *pollagan* are so well made and prominent is that they may have expressed proprietary rights. Certainly, this is recorded in the Northern Isles where there are records of arguments over rights to fishing rocks (Fenton 1978: 533). It is therefore not unreasonable to think that creating these bait-holes could be an attempt to assert or defend rights to crag-fishing, or at the very least of marking the best spots. The intertidal zone, though liminal, may well have been just as much a source of conflict and competition for resources as the best agricultural land could be.

Another type of structure found in the inter-tidal zone in large numbers are fish traps, or *caraidhean*. As noted by Benjamin et al (2014), as with all vernacular structures, the nature of fish traps is partly governed by the availability of materials and the nature of the local environment. In Loch Aoineart, almost all of the examples encountered fit the pattern of large, crescent-shaped barriers blocking natural narrows along the coast: at river mouths and at the mouth of tidal inlets. These were constructed by stones gathered locally heaped up, occasionally with openings in the centre, fitting a pattern which is very common in the Western Isles (Benjamin et al 2014: 411).

They are usually designed so that fish which have come inshore to feed at high tide or are moving up and down burns and streams during spawning are trapped within the ebb. These may be actively caught by the trap if it has a timber or wattle component or a sluice which may contain a basket or net, or they may be collected from the pool using nets (Benjamin et al 2014: 415). The same woven baskets called *tàbhan* used in

crag-fishing could probably be of use here too (Cerón-Carrasco 2011: 60). These structures were often multi-purpose, creating habitats for crabs, lobsters and mussels (Benjamin et al 2014: 416), which would have provided an additional source of food. As with many drystone vernacular structures, *caraidhean* can be hard to date. Previous work on fish traps have tended to discuss forms from across the country and all periods together, constructing typologies, describing methods of use and construction, and also providing a history of the technology (Bathgate 1949; Bannerman & Jones 1999; Dawson 2004; Hale 2004; Benjamin et al 2014). However, the *caraidhean* of Loch Aoineart have a particular temporal and cultural character. Far from being an ordinary part of a traditional and possible ancient way of coastal living, it is suggested here that, like bait-holes, they are a sign of stress in the economy. This is attested to on Loch Aoineart by their close association with settlements that appear to date from the early 19th-century landscape. This was a period of great hardship for local communities, when an



ILLUS 10 *Cairidh*, Bayhead, North Loch Aoineart

increasing population and repeated poor harvests coincided with forced resettlement and changing settlement patterns (Parker Pearson et al 2004: 172–4). A clue also survives in local culture. An early 20th-century poem about the South Uist coastal township of Hairteabhaigh describes the ruins of this abandoned 19th-century settlement. It refers to the *caraidhean* as ‘*Seòltachd gu glacadh èisg, dearbhadh ainbheirt an t-sluaigh*’ – ‘A device to catch fish, that shows people’s plight’ (Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin 2000: 78)

Only in one previous study of fish traps (Dawson 2004) is any consideration given as to how they affected the daily life of those who used them. Such fish traps are not entirely static: when in use, they have to be tended on every tide if the catch is to be secured. Where baskets or nets are used, if the catch is left it is likely to spoil or be taken by seals or other animals. It is therefore not surprising that on Loch Aoineart and elsewhere *cairidhean* are generally found sited immediately adjacent to dwellings, where they can be observed and easily worked (Dawson 2004: 22). Maintaining and repairing nets and wooden components made of relatively flimsy organic materials must have been a significant component of the task of actively working them, while stone components might tend to wash away, spread, or sink into the mud over time (Dawson 2004: 37). Unlike with large fish traps in the firths of the east and south of Scotland (Hale 2004), we know little of how these small structures were owned or how their produce was shared, although estates often had control over resources as small as a single mussel bed (Lelong 2000: 220). Fish traps can therefore be thought of not as static monuments in the landscape, but as evidence of a taskscape of fishing from the land that had its own chores, rhythms, and perhaps conflicts.

THE RHYTHMS OF THE SEA

The marine landscape brought its own routine tasks and practices which took place alongside those of the land itself. The people of Loch Aoineart were, like all farmers, dependent on the passing of the seasons for their crops and for

securing feed for their livestock. However, they were additionally dependent on the movements of marine life as fish moved inshore to spawn or juvenile fish stayed close inshore as they matured (Cerón-Carrasco 2011: 70). Add to this the kelping season, when during a few short weeks the money had to be made to pay their rent, and a busy yearly cycle of labour is established. Unfortunately, these busy times of coastal living coincided with harvest, adding additional workload at the busiest time of year. There was a great store of weather lore in Gaelic coastal communities which shows people closely watched the landscape and flora and fauna to try to predict changes in weather and sea state (MacLeod 2005). Given that seasonality was so important to crofters, it is perhaps no surprise that South Uist bards Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin and Iain MacDhòmhnail both wrote poems on the course of the crofter’s year in the early 20th-century landscape (Dòmhnall Aonghais Bhàin 2000: 44–53; MacDhòmhnail 2001: 282–3). Such accounts help us to imagine the cycle of the year for these coastal communities.

In spring, the land and the people awoke from the hungry winter months of long darkness. The agricultural tools would be repaired in preparation for sowing, field banks and walls would be renewed. So too would the small vessels pulled up for winter be renewed for their first voyages as the cod started to return, and *caraidhean* would be repaired after the winter storms had taken their toll. As the seasons turned so would the festivals, saints’ days and red-letter days. The sailing of *Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill* on *Latha Fhèill Brìghde*, St Brigid’s day, has been seen as an unlikely time to sail, the weather still being poor. However, the date had a symbolic resonance as a celebration of renewal and fertility, as the year’s first labours of manuring, ploughing, and sowing began (Black 2001: 473).

As summer came, bringing ‘*Àileadh cùbhraidh thar luibhean/Air machair buidhe nam blàth-fhlùr*’ – ‘the fragrant scent of herbs on machair yellow with blossom’ (MacDhòmhnail 2001: 282–3), the land around the loch would be sprouting with crops, with many of the men away at sea, on boats just visible from the coast, leaving the rest of the community to manage

the *caraidhean* with each turning of the tide. To autumn, and harvest, with each minute of labour being wrested from the shortening days. Alongside the taking in of the crops and the driving of cattle to be sold, the height of the kelping season would have seen masses of labourers moving across the landscape, working through the night at steaming kelp kilns (Grant forthcoming). So too a final chance for seabird fowling (see Baldwin 2004), for collecting precious eggs and meat, and for taking in fish before the winter storms began. A constant anxious reckoning to see if the rent will be paid. Finally, winter, '*fairg' a' bristeadh ri creagan, sruth tro fheadain a' bùirich*' – 'seas breaking on the rocks, currents roaring through channels' (MacDhòmhnail 2001: 283), the islands besieged by the seas and the long dull nights of repairing and making nets, waiting for the cycle to begin again.

We should not forget that the sea brought more than just annual rhythms. It brought the daily rhythms of the tide, essential for navigating by boat and crossing the mud and rocks at low water, as well as drawing fish into the fish traps. The new and full moons brought spring

tides, which added to a tidal range that already spans several metres, and these were of great importance in fishing (Cerón-Carrasco 2011: 65). This also exposed greater areas of the seabed at low tide that were home to shellfish which could be exploited, and allowed opportunities to build structures like *caraidhean* which would often be submerged. It therefore brought early mornings, interrupted sleep, unexpected opportunities and occasional disasters. All agricultural communities live lives shaped by the natural seasons, but the experience of those living in coastal communities is shaped by the rhythms of the sea; the two often sat uncomfortably alongside each other.

THE SEA AND THE ELITE

The rhythms of the sea did not just dominate the lives of those people working the land, it had a profound influence on South Uist's elite – its factors, agents and tacksmen – and the business they undertook. One building which exemplifies this is the inn at Àirigh nam Ban, on



ILLUS 11 Rubha Bhualte, North Loch Aoineart. *Feannagan*, cultivation beds, can be seen on the headland in the centre. A *cairidh*, or fish trap, and a landing place can be seen in the foreground

the north side of the loch. This large imposing structure is lime-mortared and said to have had windows and a chimney, and been slated (Moreland & MacLean 2012: 91). Although its formal construction would set it apart from the surrounding vernacular buildings, it is the people who would have used it which would have made it a place largely associated with the island's elite. Although the inn may have been used by local people, it is unlikely that any strangers or travellers could have been visiting the people who lived or worked on the land; any relatives visiting would surely have resided in the dwellings of family members. The correspondence of Robert Brown, the estate's factor, provides interesting clues as to the inn's likely clientele.

In summer 1800, the vessels *Friendship*, *Margaret*, *Endeavour*, *Delight* and *Jean* all arrived to collect kelp at least once, their captains coming ashore to hand formal letters to Brown or his colleagues instructing them to load kelp. Whilst these ships' captains and crews may have slept aboard, it is not unreasonable to think that some of them may also have frequented the local inn, taking advantage of food and drink at least, if not also accommodation. The estate's agents, constantly travelling around Clanranald's lands during the summer season, may have also chosen to stay here occasionally. It is easy for the modern traveller, used to timetables and schedules, to forget that ships could be forced to remain in port for days on end, awaiting favourable winds. When Aonghas Òg, tacksman of Àirigh Mhuilinn, wrote to Brown in summer 1800 that he was travelling to Edinburgh with the first fair weather (NRAS 2177/1508–10), this meant more than simply boarding a ship at an allotted time. It probably meant heading to Loch Aoineart when the weather seemed clement or he had heard word of a ship sailing, being sure to arrive there in good time before the appropriate tide, and perhaps waiting to be allowed to board. If the weather was not suitable then he would presumably have to wait a tide or two or for sailing conditions to improve. It is not difficult to imagine the inn in these circumstances operating as a glorified waiting room.

In an age of emails and instant electronic communication, it takes a visit to an archive to

remind us of the physicality of communication in the past. In the bundles of Robert Brown's correspondence there are neat, carefully folded letters sealed with wax wafers, battered dog-eared and dirty covers which speak of dusty roads and greasy pockets, letters from the mainland which must have run the gauntlet of the Minch, avoiding 'sea hazard and capture' (NRAS 2177/1508–10), and hastily written notes scratched out as ships lay waiting at Leith, Greenock or Hull. It is important to consider that these communications were not private and abstracted expressions of power: they were of and in the landscape. The people of Loch Aoineart, particularly those in the houses around the inn, would have seen messengers coming and going from the inn, heralding the arrival or departure of vessels, or signalling a procession of annual administrative events such as rent collection or kelp surveying. In this way the sea would be a conduit through which power and money flowed between the outside world and the Clanranald estate, and the people upon whose labour much of this power was ultimately based.

The sea could also be a great social leveller. The aforementioned Aonghas Òg, tacksman of the nearby township of Àirigh Mhuilinn, drowned in Loch Aoineart while ferrying kelp to a larger ship in 1809. He could well have been rowing with his crew in a *geòla* or *sgoth* from Port Skeig to the *Jean*, *Friendship* or any other of the small sloops that plied the loch. This event was memorialised shortly after the event by Benbecula poet Angus Campbell, and was still to be found in local tradition in the 20th century (Shaw 1977: 105).

'S thug thu ràimh dha d' chuid ghillean,

Cha robh tuilleadh a dhìth ort;

Gun robh thu 'n dùil mar a b' àbhaist

Gun robh do shnàmh mar an fhaoileag,

Gun robh do shnàmh mar an eala

A dh' fhalbhadh aigeannach aotrom;

Do phearsa dìreach deas, dealbhach,

Gur bochd a dh' fhalbh thu gun aois bhuainn

You gave the oars to your crew, you required nothing more; you thought, as usual, you could swim like the seagull, that you could swim like the swan which would go lightly and lively, with your straight and beautiful

form. Sad it is that you left us before reaching old age. (Shaw 1977: 105)

At a basic level, the poem is a reminder that the sea had a huge influence in the life, and in this case, death, of the community of South Uist across the social scale. The poem above gives us hints as to the complex relationship the community had with its elite, particularly those belonging to its fast-disappearing traditional clan infrastructure. It repeats classic themes of Gaelic praise poetry, couching these in relation to his skill as a mariner and swimmer, showing the cultural impact of the sea on social relationships (Newton 2009: 97–102). The poem is an analogy of the coastal communities of Loch Aoineart and the wider Uists – these were people of the land whose fate was tied to the sea by cultural and economic bonds. Ultimately, the vagaries of the kelp trade contributed towards much of their society crashing down as the century progressed (Bumsted 2005: 130–2), ultimately bankrupting the estate and sending many of the population across the sea to America. These events also added another Gaelic cultural association to the sea – as a symbol of emigration (Meek 2003: 87–9).

CONCLUSION

The brief consideration of life on the shores of Loch Aoineart presented here is far from comprehensive, and is intended to focus on a very specific place and time. However, it does introduce several themes which it is argued are crucial for the study of such coastal communities.

At first glance, we might regard the community of Loch Aoineart as seafarers, heirs to a heroic tradition, drawing many of their resources from the sea and in all likelihood being constantly in and out of small boats. However, the community of Loch Aoineart was more ‘coastal’ than ‘maritime’. Their engagements with the sea came largely along the intertidal zone, with fishing vessels and ships used for trade being either controlled by the elite or the preserve of semi-professional seafarers drawn from the wider Hebridean community. Repeatedly we see evidence of seafood and fishing as a marker of

poverty. Gaeldom was a society which placed value on land and the products of agriculture. When times were good, perhaps communities preferred to look landward, to activities in which their culture saw value, rather than in work which was dangerous and often produced foodstuffs which were little desired. Often, engagements with the sea projected agricultural practices on to the ocean, and coastal waters were understood through their relationship to the land. Perhaps the open sea was a place for the elite, both in the imagery of Gaelic culture – the heroic *birlinn* – and increasingly in reality as seaborne trade became more international and Anglophone.

Small coastal boats were risky – the large number of songs and stories about drowning in Gaelic culture and the associations of the sea with loss are testament to that. It has been suggested that another reason for a degree of caution toward exploiting the sea to the fullest extent is risk management – boat disasters could often claim the lives of many young men from a single community, a loss that those who remained would struggle to cope with (Fleming 2005: 90). One way in which such risk was managed was through an intense understanding of the local coast and waters, borne out through the many landing places and in Loch Aoineart’s place-names.

The example provided here is an interesting counterpoint to environmentally deterministic ways of seeing coastal communities. As archaeologists, we often imagine the sea as a conduit for movement and communication, a place of economic opportunity which would naturally be exploited by communities who lived there. On Loch Aoineart, it could be said that life was never truly maritime; all aspects of daily life lay somewhere on a spectrum from being entirely on the land to entirely of the sea, with a foot in both being common. Individuals lay in different places along this spectrum, their engagement with the sea dependent on their status, wealth and personal circumstances. For the elite, it represented a highway to international trade and wealth, for many of the poor it tied them in to a punishing routine of labour in addition to the tough life they were already experiencing, and its resources could often be those of last resort.

One of the key aspects of the approach taken in this paper was the extensive use of material from Gaelic culture. This allows for crucial insights into a range of activities which leave little or no trace in the archaeological record. However, it is argued here that the sea was also deeply inscribed with cultural memory, symbolism, and geographical and toponymic understandings. Many of these understandings come from the land, such as place-names which project meaning into the waters around them through the knowledge needed for navigation. There are other elements of the marine landscape which are wholly of the sea – the experience of rowing a boat in a storm, the knowledge of the fish that only live far from the coast and the stories of the beings that inhabit the otherworld beneath the waves. These elements, while not physically marking the landscape, are inscribed just as deeply within Gaelic culture and communal memory.

Previous study of coastal features such as *pollagan* and *caraidhean* have often taken them out of their historical and cultural contexts, viewing them as a ‘technology’. At a most basic level, historical and cultural context is required in order to see many of the *caraidhean* of Loch Aoineart (and elsewhere) as a phenomenon born largely of a particular set of circumstances in the region in the period. To consider how they shaped people’s lives and landscapes, a consideration of the seasonality and patterns of their use is crucial. The experience of Gaels along the coast was not one which is totally distinctive or unique compared to those who made their living solely by the land; rather it was an adjunct, a set of tasks and experiences both unique to the sea and intimately interconnected with the rhythms of the land. Often, these rhythms simply added even more labour to already busy times of year, rather than creating a more even round of annual work.

It is suggested here that the coastal landscape of post-medieval Gaeldom requires further study, both in terms of fieldwork and survey and greater interdisciplinary working. This paper suggests one way forward. Building on the excellent work which has been done so far to catalogue, type and understand features such as fish traps,

a holistic approach which incorporates evidence from Gaelic culture, archaeological evidence, and historical context should be adopted. Such an approach, that has been termed a ‘historical ethnography’ (Gazin-Schwartz 2001), has been advocated by other archaeologists in the past who were working in both material culture and landscape (Symonds 1999), but its potential remains largely unrealised. Only by drawing on the rich cultural evidence from Gaeldom can we draw meaning from its coastal archaeology and begin to understand what life was like along its thousands of miles of coastline.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr Chris Dalgligh and Dr Martin MacGregor for their guidance and support during the research which inspired this article. The excellent work of the Sheffield Environmental and Archaeology Research Campaign in the Hebrides (SEARCH) project formed a crucial part of the evidence-base on Loch Aoineart. I am also grateful to George Geddes for comments on a draft of this paper, and for very useful feedback from two anonymous reviewers. I am grateful to authors and publishers who gave permission to reproduce illustrations. Finally, thanks are due to the Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology who provided a grant toward fieldwork costs.

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