Dun Ara: a Norse-period 'harbour' in Mull?

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ABSTRACT

This short article explores the archaeology and fragmentary history of the site known as Dun Ara, in Mishnish, north Mull, in the light of increasing evidence of a Norse presence both generally in this part of the Inner Hebrides and more specifically this area of Mull. The focus is on the harbour and its appendages but it refers as well to the associated settlement and dun – or castle – perched above to the north. It is set in the context of recent work on early harbours and landing places in the Western Isles, some of which have been demonstrated to have had a Norse presence. Consideration is given to the ramifications of the tidal cycle and to what extent, if any, isostatic change and rising sea levels may affect the 'picture' as it is now observed. While reflecting that the evidence for a 'Norse' period at Dun Ara remains circumstantial, it suggests that the absence of conclusive proof does not preclude the likelihood.

INTRODUCTION

The 'Viking Age' and the 'Norse period'[1] continue to exercise the interests of the academic community as archaeology uncovers more evidence of the presence of Norse-speaking Scandinavians who exploited and settled the North Atlantic littoral. New techniques and equipment, facilitating highly specialised lines of investigation, are enabling more thorough and comprehensive excavation reports than ever before. This is as true of Scotland's western seaboard as anywhere. Two very recent examples reflect this: the highly detailed reports on the Norse settlement sites on the west coast of South Uist at Cille Pheadair [Kilpheder] (Parker Pearson 2018) and Bornais [Bornish] (Sharples 2020). They are veritable batteries of scientific studies which trace these contrasting sites through their occupation periods of *c* 1000–1200 at Cille Pheadair and to the 15th century at Bornais. Both sites, among the more prominent of 20 or more known Norse settlements in South Uist, have been studied for some time, but new discoveries of the Norse presence in the Hebridean archipelago and adjacent mainland are also being made. A noteworthy example is

the 10th-century boat burial at Swordle Bay in Ardnamurchan, discovered and excavated in 2011 and fully reported on in 2017 (Harris et al 2017). Here a Norse, high status individual was interred, symbolically, in an area already in long use by those burying their dead. For present purposes though, the point to emphasise is that such impressive analyses relate to structures and graves with their associated finds, rooted on *terra firma*. While there have also been numerous studies of Norse-age vessels, also inspired by archaeological investigation, by contrast, relatively little has been written about Norse landing places and what we might loosely call, their 'harbours'.

This is hardly surprising owing to the dearth of evidence available. Decay of timber-made features, damage to surface stones, erosion of coast lines and changes in relative sea level (RSL) all contribute to make this an especially difficult area to research. Narratives add little of consequence, although they may at least suggest where to look.[2] In any case, the Norse colonies of the North Atlantic would generally have made use of natural sandy inlets for their landing places. Coastal trading sites in use only during the summer months would, no

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doubt, have been such simple berths (probably as depicted in Owen 1999: 6, 26–7). These places would have had virtually nothing in the way of a harbour infrastructure which included such features as jetties and wharves. Major urban concentrations did, conversely, come to have developed harbours, but these were rare. A notable example is Hedeby in Denmark, where part of the harbour was excavated in 1979 and 1980. Beginning as just another natural soft landing place, in the 9th century, Hedeby acquired jetties, solid landing sites and, it is thought, boat-builders' workshops on the shore front between the jetties (Kalmring 2007: 166–7).

In Scotland, the absence of any sizable Norse towns would appear to explain why there is little or nothing in the way of such major maritime installations. Still, it is essential to remember the supreme importance of sea travel in the Norse–Scottish diaspora. This necessitated a profusion of places where vessels could be constructed, berthed, repaired and stored. In her seminal *Scandinavian Scotland*, Barbara Crawford remarked that 'every settlement must have had its boat-house' (Crawford 1987: 15). Although
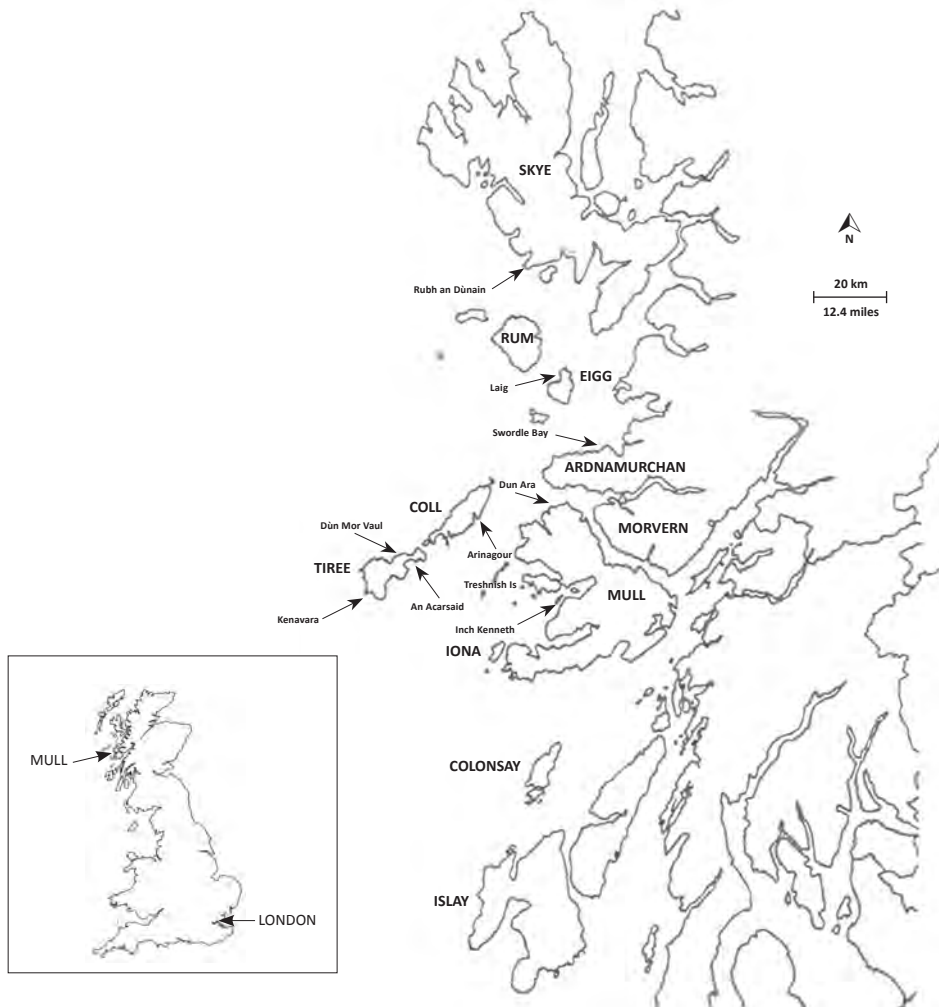
ILLUS 1   Outline of the maritime area showing some places mentioned in the text. (© James Petre)

we might now be more careful with what is meant by a 'boat-house', the point is well made.

Despite the difficulties involved, in the last decade there have been some notable investigations into Norse-age harbour installations beyond Scandinavia. These have focused on Greenland and Shetland (Mehler et al 2019; Wilken et al 2019) and the Hebrides (Martin 2009, 2014, 2017; Martin & Martin 2010, 2018). These studies help to form a picture of how the Norse docked and maintained their vessels. This paper looks at one such possible harbour – Dun Ara in Mishnish, north Mull. It begins by referring to studies of probable Norse harbours elsewhere, especially on the western seaboard of Scotland where the site on Skye, known as Rubh' an Dùnain, has been explored with considerable thoroughness. The paper then discusses Dun Ara itself in terms of its physical attributes, its interplay with changing tide levels and its relationship with its coastline. Comparison and contrast with Rubh' an Dùnain produce as many questions as answers. Finally, the paper moves on to the context of local indicators of a Norse presence in north Mull and asks if anything may be inferred from those who may have occupied Dun Ara in the Middle Ages. It reflects that these people, MacKinnons, may have had Norse-speaking forbears who created the harbour facility, perhaps around the turn of the millennium. These distinct but complimentary lines of enquiry do not prove that Dun Ara, and in particular its harbour arrangement, had its foundation in the time of the Norse occupation of Mull. At the same time, however, neither do they disprove it. Further investigation might take matters forward; for the present, what we have is the possibility that Dun Ara was occupied by Norse speakers and that it was they who developed its 'harbour'.

HARBOURS

The ongoing 'Harbours in the North Atlantic' project, an element in a larger programme that looks at harbours from the Roman Iron Age to the Middle Ages, is breaking new ground. The project has focused on Greenland and the Shetland islands, producing some fascinating results. In particular, sites explored in Greenland have been dated to its occupation by Norse people; their so-called 'warehouses', a type of building found only in Greenland, have excited especial interest (Wilken et al 2019; Mehler et al 2019). As regards Scotland, a number of possible locations are being identified, most recently and notably by Colin Martin working in partnership with the Royal Commission part of Historic Environment Scotland (HES). In particular, their survey of the western seaboard has produced a number of potential landing places where natural features have been enhanced and are close to pre-modern defensive structures. As Martin has noted, it is frequently impossible to date such 'developed' landing places, so it is not realistic to assign them easily to any particular period (Martin 2017: 115–16). There are instances, however, where there are good clues. A prominent example was the discovery in the later 19th century of two prepared but unused end pieces and a possible keel of a Norse-type boat in the drained loch at Laig (NGR: NM 472 878) on Eigg. This added substance to the local tradition that Norsemen used the loch 'as a winter harbour for their galleys' (MacPherson 1878: 594–6. Also Crawford 1987: 15–16; Dressler 1998: 4; Hunter 2016: 142–3; Martin 2017: 121; Martin & Martin 2018: 155–6). Another possible site is on Tiree at Dùn Mor Vaul (NGR: NM 042 492). This is a broch/roundhouse close to a narrow creek with a sandy beach at its head, protected by a semi-circular earthwork incorporating the foundations of a rectangular building. An excavation in the broch in 1962–4 found possible evidence of a Norse presence. A single-edged composite bone comb, 'probably of early Norse date', and the disarticulated skeleton of an adult male who had suffered a violent death, were found in the intramural gallery. The excavation report recorded that the skeleton was 'either a Norseman or a Dark Age inhabitant of Tiree killed in a Norse raid' (Mackie 1974: 231; RCAHMS 1980: 94, 202; Holliday 2016: 455 and pers comm). Had modern scientific techniques been available, as with the Ardnamurchan individual (Harris et al 2017: 199–200), it might have been possible to indicate whether

the victim was indeed a Norseman. At any rate, it can be asked if Norse settlers created or at least developed these landing places on Eigg and on Tiree's north coast. Another possible Tiree Norse landing site can be inferred from its place-name: on the south-west of the island, on the Ceann a' Mhara [Kenavara] headland, there is an Iron Age fort known in Old Norse [ON] as *Skarðaborg* (fort of the gaps in the ridge), where *skarð* = crevice or gap on a hill ridge and *borg* = fort, and significantly in Gaelic as *Dùn na Gall* (fort of the foreigners/Scandinavians).[3] Below it, is *Borabrig* (landing place of the fort), likely from ON *bryggia* = landing place and again, *borg* = fort (NGR: NL 934 408) (Holliday 2016: 204, 278–9 and pers comm). John Holliday has identified other local landing sites – at An Acarsaid, Milton, in east Tiree, below Dùn Mòr a' Chaolais (NGR: NM 083 473) and over in Coll in the inlet of Arinagour where there are boat nousts (John Holliday pers comm). Neither can be dated, however.

Most of these places have extensive viewsheds which were essential for coast-watching. This was an important function, allowing early warning of the approach of hostile vessels. The proximity of a vantage point with a naval capability was clearly very advantageous. It may reasonably be assumed that 'harbour' sites were selected with this attribute in mind.

RUBH' AN DÙNAIN

The most noteworthy site of Scotland's north-western seaboard to have been studied in depth is in Skye on the peninsula of Rubh' an Dùnain, between Loch Brittle to the north and Soay Sound to the south (NGR: NG 395 161). The significance of its archaeology is now well established and written up (Miers 2008: 244; Martin 2009: 92–3; Martin & Martin 2010: 88; Martin 2014: 185–99; Martin 2017: 121; Butler 2018: 16–19; Martin & Martin 2018; Canmore ID 11028). Martin & Martin (2018) is, to date, the definitive published report. In brief, there is a Neolithic passage grave; a galleried headland fort, probably of Iron Age origin and

seemingly modified in later periods; a harbour in the hidden inlet beneath the headland fort and an artificial canal linking the sea with a lochan, named Loch na h-Àirde. The canal is 100m long, 3.5m wide and at high water about 0.6m deep (Martin 2009; Martin & Martin 2018: 147, 153). In its lower, seaward section near the sea, it was endowed with two stone-lined docks which could take modest-sized boats at high tide; above each was a hollowed out stone-lined noust, possibly 'walled and roofed as boathouses in the Norse tradition' (Martin & Martin 2018: 147). In its upper section, the canal is now blocked by boulders, effectively making it useless – no doubt something that happened when the canal fell out of use. A stone-built quay runs on either side of the canal's entrance to the loch; it is now submerged, quite likely because its surface stones have been dislodged or been robbed. The loch varies in extent from about 200m to 240m wide. It is shallow, having a fairly constant depth of no more than 1.5m throughout the tidal cycle (Martin 2009; Martin & Martin 2018: 147–9). An oak boat timber identifiable as a 'bite' from a Norse-type 'faering', gauged to be a clinker-built, four-oared (two-man) rowing boat approximately 6m long, was recovered in 2000 and radiocarbon dated to *c* 1100. Later, another timber was found, apparently from a similar though larger vessel – a sailing boat perhaps over 10m long. Although this has been dated to much more recent times, it reflects the continuing tradition of clinker-built boats used in association with the loch.

There are then indications of a Norse presence at Rubh' an Dùnain. There is also circumstantial historical evidence to support this: a cleared village on the promontory included a house occupied by the chief of the MacAskills, a clan clearly of Norse origin and probably descended from the Viking Asgill (Black 2018: 15 and pers comm). The MacAskills were 'coast-watchers' for the Macleods here at the south-west extremity of Macleod territory. The panoramic viewshed from Rubh' an Dùnain out to sea was an important advantage of the site. The MacAskills maintained the Macleods' galleys which, traditionally, were over-wintered

Sea

rocky foreshore

outcrop

outcrop

Sea

rocky foreshore

channel

harbour

blockage

spring

step in channel

boulders

lateral gap in south side of channel

Sea

ILLUS 2   Dun Ara, Mull, general plan – castle, settlement and harbour complex, extended to show the coastline and foreshore at low tide. (© Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland, Historic Environment Scotland 1973)

in the loch (Martin 2017: 121; Martin & Martin 2018: 141–2, 153). The overall conclusion reached is that a natural inlet may have been occupied and enhanced by the Norse as a secure centre for building, repairing and over-wintering. The whole site has been formally recorded by HES as an historic monument with the harbour complex being of potential Norse

origins (Martin 2017: 121; Butler 2018: 16–19; Martin & Martin 2018: esp 157).

DUN ARA

The distinct possibility that such marine facilities were occupied and probably developed by the Norse make it so much more likely that the

Illus 3   Harbour basin within rocky inlet from Dun Ara castle, low tide. The boat landing is in front of the figures and the nousts to their left. (© James Petre)

Norse created numerous other docking systems which have yet to be adequately recognised. One such possibility is on Mull's north coast, at the site known as Dun Ara in Mishnish (NGR: NM 427 577). This constitutes a complex of Dun Ara 'castle' on its prominent outcrop, a settlement and a harbour. Canmore ascribes settlement and harbour as 'period unassigned' (Canmore ID 22069; site no. NM45NW). It describes the 'castle' as medieval but also notes that it may be built over an earlier fort. If so, Dun Ara was later reoccupied and elaborated, as it's suggested may also have been the case at Rubh' an Dùnain (Martin & Martin 2018: 143, 153). Unfortunately, it is impossible to date construction periods of Dun Ara 'castle'. It is, however, worth noting John Raven's argument in favour of Norse-period Hebridean Dun reoccupation. His thesis is that this occurred at a time of 'cultural and political realignment away from Norway, when a newly emerging, or at least increasingly Gaelic, identity was being deliberately recreated' (2017: esp 131). As Raven goes on to say, this may be detected too in the tendency of some Norse

'clans' to obviate their Scandinavian origins and invent instead a noble Gaelic provenance, a point made earlier by David Sellar (1981).

At some point, a settlement of sorts grew up around the base of the fort–castle to the east and the south. One of the ruined structures of this settlement (J on Illus 2), resembles a Norse longhouse. This would appear to be paralleled at the Skye site where a decayed building partly over-sits a long building with rounded corners (Martin & Martin 2018: 141). There are traces of rig and furrow, again characteristic of the Skye site. Dun Ara, therefore, may be another instance of an ancient site adopted and developed. Below the dun and settlement is a small loch–harbour with a channel connecting to the sea. The RCAHMS entry for Dun Ara harbour is worth reproducing in full:

> On the SW side of the castle there is an artificially constructed harbour incorporating a small jetty [R on illus 2], and a quay and boat-landing [Q on illus 2], at the upper end of which there are two boat-nousts [P on illus 2]. The entry to the harbour is

now partly blocked by boulders, but must formerly have been accessible to small boats at high tide. It is hard to say when this harbour assumed its present form, and some of the existing masonry may be of comparatively recent date, but the main features probably go back to the period of occupation of the castle (RCAHMS 1980: 202).

Details of the harbour at Dun Ara might be compared to various other sites, as with its 4.2m wide revetted boat-landing (Q on Illus 2; Illus 4) reminiscent of that at the Brough of Birsay in Orkney (Crawford 1987: 15 and fig 2). The present day landing at Birsay is thought to be a modern construction but that it overlays a Norse predecessor based on the 9th–10th-century dating of the boat house at its top (Julie Gibson pers comm). An early boat-landing at Dun Ara may also have been in situ and then later enhanced in more recent times. The comparison with Rubh' an Dùnain is, however, especially interesting. Their general locations both facilitate coast-watching. Clearly Dun Ara's rocky tor was itself a fine vantage point; another lies 150m NNE at the tip of a promontory known as Sron na h-Aire

(Sorne Point) where there is a cairn, scheduled in 2003 and recorded as 'period unassigned' (Canmore ID 22071; site no. NM45NW 11). Both Rubh an Dùnain and Dun Ara were well placed to communicate with other islands (see Illus 1 above). Martin noted especially Rubh an Dùnain's intervisibility with islands to the south and its distance from Laig on Eigg, observing that 'the two sites may have had a direct association' (Martin 2018: 156). Dun Ara and nearby Sorne Point also have wide viewsheds. They look directly onto Coll to the west and Ardnamurchan to the north. Approaching vessels from these directions would have included those coming from farther afield, notably Tiree and the Treshnish Islands from the west – and from the north, Eigg and beyond. Indeed, the distance to Eigg is not much greater than Eigg is from Skye – a point emphasised in the description of the viewshed of Rubh an Dùnain. Convenient communications was seen as important: Hugh MacDonald of Sleat commented it was this that persuaded the MacKinnons who held land in Strath, Skye, to accept Mishnish

ILLUS 4   Revetted edge of boat landing, low tide. (© James Petre)

Illus 5   Upper section of outflow channel, low tide, showing step. (© James Petre)

Illus 6   Lower section of outflow channel, low tide. (© James Petre)

ILLUS 7   Harbour with inflow stream (left on photograph) leading across to outflow to sea, low tide.
            (© James Petre)

ILLUS 8   Harbour basin from the channel blockage. The inflowing stream is on the far (east) side of the harbour
            basin. (© James Petre)

territory in exchange for other lands in the Ross of Mull in the 1390s (MacDonald of Sleat 1914: 33).

The channel between the 'harbour' basin and the sea at Dun Ara (Illus 5 and 6) is some 60m long and for most of its length, 4m wide – its width remarkably similar to that of its boat landing, noted above. It is, then, a little shorter but roughly of a similar width to the one at Rubh' an Dùnain. The channel appears to be an entirely natural feature. It has a step in its upper section, various mouths and a side channel lower down. As noted by the Royal Commission, and as was found at Rubh' an Dùnain, the channel at Dun Ara was also blocked up at some point. In both cases, there is inflow of fresh water into the harbour basins, so that at low tide, water pours out to sea via their channels. Both are impassable at such times (Illus 7 and 8).

There are, however, notable differences as well as these similarities. First, unlike Rubh' an Dùnain, the harbour at Dun Ara is partly man made. This is especially apparent in the north-west quadrant of the harbour–basin, between the boat landing and the entrance to the channel to the sea (Illus 9). The long coast of Mishnish and neighbouring Quinish is rocky; there are no sandy inlets best suited for drawing up boats, such as occur farther west in Mornish. An adequate maritime facility by Dun Ara, therefore, would have had to be created within the most promising of nearby bays. As noted by the Royal Commission, there may have been some limited, modern-day adjustments: in particular, it is known that it was used as a bathing pool by Margaret Lithgow, the owner of the Glengorm estate from 1911 to 1938. She suffered from arthritis and sought relief from immersing in sea water. She had sand brought in from Calgary Bay, much of which still remains at the bottom of the harbour basin (Nelson 2018: 67 and pers comm).

Second, with a diameter varying between 45m to 55m, it is considerably smaller than Loch na h-Àirde. The more important difference, however, is in regard to high tides. At Rubh' an Dùnain, for short periods, sea water could enter and it would have been then that small vessels

Illus 9   Revetted north-west arc of the harbour basin and boat landing. The channel connecting with the sea is on the left. (© James Petre)

ILLUS 10   Harbour basin and its bay from Dun Ara castle at high tide. The boat landing is submerged but the nousts remain above the water line. (© James Petre)

could safely pass through. Nevertheless and perhaps surprisingly, it is held that 'the level in the loch remains largely constant throughout the tidal cycle' (Martin 2009: 92). The sea did not, therefore, come in and flood the lochan. This is not the position at Dun Ara. While the 'harbour' has the integrity depicted on the RCAHMS plan (Illus 2) at low tide, at high tide the whole bay in which the 'harbour' sits is under water and its contours are largely hidden. At present, there is a maximum tidal range of just under 5m. Thus the 'harbour' changes from a shallow basin, some 0.6m deep, to a sea-swept inlet varying between 4.5m and 5.5m deep (compare Illus 3 with Illus 10).

Might environmental changes have occurred in the last millennium that could be a factor? RSL changes have radically affected some sites. Cille Pheadair, mentioned earlier, is now totally lost, owing to coastal erosion. Another outstanding example is at Igaliku (*Garðar*), the main centre of Norse Greenland, where the rise in sea level has transformed its maritime landscape (Wilken et al 2019; Mehler et al 2019). This is not an aspect

that was taken up in the analysis of Rubh' an Dùnain: evidence of RSL change, or its absence, was not then available to its investigators (Martin & Martin 2018: 147). It is as well to consider this, if only to discount it. In fact, the effect of rising sea levels in the central Inner Hebrides and adjacent mainland has been largely cancelled out by local isostatic change. A study focused on the shorelines of Tiree and Coll showed that geological upthrust has increased from west to east in the long quaternary period; more pertinently, the east of Tiree has risen 18cm more than its west end in the last millennium (Dawson 1994: esp 353). By extension, it can be inferred that Mull's coastline has risen even more in the same period. Indeed, a recent study shows that RSL in neighbouring Coll and Ardnamurchan has hardly changed in this time span, so it is likely that what can now be seen at Dun Ara will not be so very different from how matters were about the year 1000 (Shennan et al 2018: 148, 151, 156; Joanna Hambly pers comm).

What can be inferred from this? Entry and exit would have been easier than at Rubh' an

Dùnain. It was ideal for use by small vessels such as Skuldelev 3 and Skuldelev 6. Skuldelev 3, dating from *c* 1040, was a small, oak-built open sailing boat designed to carry cargo up to 4.5t. It was some 14m long, 3.4m wide, crewed by four to six people. Its primary application was for coastal trade. It compares very closely with the remains found on Eigg (Crawford 1987: 15–16). Skuldelev 6, from *c* 1030, which could be rowed or sailed, appears intended instead for hunting and fishing. It was constructed of pine planks, was 11.2m long, 2.5m wide and manned by seven pairs of rowers (Hall 2007: 55; Bill 2008: 176–8; Hjarder & Vike 2016: 150–2). Either of these vessels could be hauled up into the nousts (P on Illus 2) which remain clear of the water, even at high tide.

Such vessels are a little larger than those thought to have used the larger Loch na-h-Àirde. Martin pointed out that Dun Ara could only have accommodated a couple of medium-sized boats at most (Martin 2017: 119). Skuldelev 3 and 6 would certainly fit with this judgement but this limitation depends on visualising Dun Ara at low tide only. Indeed, it may be that if judicious use was made of the falling mid-tide, more sizeable vessels could have been admitted and tied up to await low tide, when cargoes of bulky freight and livestock could be taken on or unloaded. A vessel such as Skuldelev 1, a Norse ocean-going cargo boat dating to around 1030, weighing 24t, 16.3m long, some 5m wide midships and with a draught of 1m, may, theoretically therefore, have been able to dock at Dun Ara (Bill 2008: 176–8; McKinnon & McKinnon 2017: 25). Its location, on Mull's north coast, would have been ideal for such maritime trade and transport. Such boats could have left as the tide returned or be beached on the high tide waterline.

From this, it appears that there could have been a variety of uses to which the 'harbour' was put. It could have accommodated localised, small coastal traffic, carrying personnel on their travels and in pursuit of meat and fish. Equally, it was potentially a resource for the transport of traded goods. On the other hand, the tidal cycle would have attenuated its use as a refuge and for over-wintering, attributes proposed for Rubh' an Dùnain. At any rate, it is reasonable to infer that the potential utility of the 'harbour' need not have been restricted to any one function.

It has to be emphasised, however, that as yet there is nothing at hand to attempt a date for this 'harbour'. Similarly, we cannot say that the buildings of the castle, and those around its base, date from any specific period. The harbour and elements of the structures below the castle could have been made by Norse-speaking people. Alternatively, these structures might be later. Still, building J (Illus 2) may have continued the lines and style of a Norse predecessor, as postulated for the Skye site. The likelihood of a Norse occupation period may be increasing in the light of recent archaeological finds in adjacent territories, such as Ardnamurchan, discussed above but more to the point, in north Mull. It is to this that we now turn.

THE MULL CONTEXT – ARCHAEOLOGY, TOPONYMY, HISTORY

ARCHAEOLOGY

The archaeological evidence for the Norse occupation of the coastal areas of Argyll and its Inner Hebridean chain is arguably somewhat fragmentary. Leading scholars of the period are transparently conscious of this. In the Regional Archaeological Research Framework for Argyll of 2017, Ewan Campbell and Colleen Batey set a number of key research areas for the future. One was to seek out Norse settlements on the islands to go with the burials there (ScARF 2017).

In Mull, local initiatives, reinforced by professional advice, are partly answering this challenge. They are adding to what has been known and in the public domain for many years. What follows is a brief summary of relevant archaeology relating to north Mull. It does not recite the well-known evidence from the outlying islands of Iona and Inch Kenneth in relation to their hoards and the grave slabs and cross shafts on Iona – indicative of a Norse presence but not necessarily a permanent settlement (for which: Stevenson 1951; Stevenson 1966: xix-xx, xxx-xxxi; Graham-Campbell 1976: 122, 124, 128–9; Graham-Campbell 1995: 49–50, 147; Graham-

Campbell & Batey, 1998: 231, 233–4, 237, 240–1; Graham-Campbell 2013, 254; Yeoman & Scott 2014: 60–1; Caldwell 2018: 31). It should be noted, however, that in the last decade, Norse artefacts dating to the 9th or 10th century, have been found in Iona, attesting 'their physical presence and very probable occupation' (Yeoman & Scott 2014: 60; Ellis 2017: 93).

So far as the main island of Mull itself is concerned, until very recently, identified Norse remains were scanty in the extreme (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 87–8). The fundamental question of Norse settlement remained unanswered, owing to the seeming absence of their houses. In 2018, David Caldwell asked 'to what extent the lack of evidence for Scandinavian settlement (in Mull and Iona) reflects an underlying reality or the lack of research in modern times at identifying its presence' (2018: 29). Yet perhaps now, Norse dwellings may be emerging. The excavations at Baliscate discerned a late-11th–early-13th-century stone and turf bow-ended structure, built probably as a longhouse. It has been compared with those at Driomore [Drimore] and Bornais [Bornish] in South Uist. Baliscate also has revealed a contemporary or near-contemporary Norse corn-drying kiln arrangement, which has

also been compared to a structure at Bornais. 'It is plausible that what is being seen at Baliscate is the direct influence of Norse settlers' (Ellis 2017: 1, 34, 96, 101).

Significantly perhaps, more recent 'discoveries' of potential Norse occupation lie even nearer to Dun Ara. Two kilometres to the east, at Lephin, excavations into a late 12th–early 13th-century enclosed farmstead or chapel with a burial ground, or both, have uncovered the fragments of a late 10th–11th-century decorated composite bone comb, similar to ones found on Norse period sites in Orkney and Scandinavia. Investigation at this site is ongoing (Ellis 2019a: 18; 2019b: 2). Close by, in the lower portion of the narrow valley leading down to the cove named Port Chill Bhraonain (NGR: NM 446 577), a pair of probable man-made mounds, some 2m × 4m, were identified in 2017. Though these have yet to be excavated, it has been suggested that here there may be two Norse boat burials similar to the Swordle Bay site (Leach 2017: 1 and pers comm).

Two kilometres to the west of Dun Ara, in Quinish across Loch Mingary, 'a possible Viking period sherd … from a small oval fort at Mingary [was found] … which might … indicate some Viking activity' (Graham-Campbell & Batey

Illus 11   Map of north Mull adapted to show places mentioned in the text. (James Petre, from base map © Crown copyright and database rights 2020)

1998: 87–8). Some 4km to the west of Dun Ara, in Mornish, another site has been discussed and partly investigated. This lies on the edge of the machair by the sandy cove of Port Langamull by Crossapol Bay, where a beach landing would have been possible. On the west side of the inlet, there is an old dun, now severely decayed. In July 2018, surface surveys were made of what were tentatively seen as a Viking burial (NGR: NM 382 539) and crucially, a 'longhouse' (NGR: NM 385 539). The latter structure is, however, very narrow by established 'longhouse' standards and could indeed be something else altogether. If this latter structure is, however, ultimately confirmed as of Norse origin, it will be of major importance as a potential second (with Baliscate) example of a Norse structure found in Mull (Peter Leach pers comm; Miller 2018: 19, 53–65).

TOPONYMY

There have been three noteworthy studies of the place-name evidence of Mull (Johnston 1990; Maclean 1997; Whyte 2017). These demonstrate that Old Norse [ON] is plentiful and suggest that parts of the island were settled comprehensively by Norse-speaking people. In the area west of Dun Ara discussed above, the area name 'Quinish' is noted as certainly ON, deriving from *kvi* (cattlefold) and *nes* (headland). Farther west lies Mornish, from ON *myrr* (moor/wet, boggy ground) and *nes* again. Mingary, mentioned above, is also a possible ON place-name, having the generic *garðr* (farm or garden). There is a particular concentration of Norse names on the north-west coast, remarkably so at the Mornish site – notably Langamull, Crossapol, Sunipol and Frachadill. Crossapol and Sunipol are notable *bolstaðr* farm names (Crawford 1987: 110–11; Johnston 1990; Maclean 1997; Miller 2018: 28, 30, 53, 107–11). Interestingly, Jennings & Kruse (2009: 135, 138) deduce that *bolstaðr* are secondary settlements, indicating an increasing and enduring Norse presence in the areas in question. Crossapol (Cross Farm) is a particularly common name: there are other instances in the Hebrides, including in nearby Coll and Tiree. One implication of the name is that it may signify a burial place (Holliday 2016:

322–3). Place-name evidence may also reflect an eventual merging of language as Norse and non-Norse evolved into a mixed, hybrid culture. In the north of Mull, ON and Old Gaelic [OG] may have merged, perhaps in the names Mishnish, Quinish, Mornish and Treshnish, where, as noted the suffix -nish may derive from ON *nes* – headland but perhaps too from OG *inis* – island, but also peninsula (Alasdair Whyte pers comm).

HISTORY

The Norse in Mull

Leaving aside allusions to raids, historical records of the Norse on Mull are indirect at best. Earl Sigurd II 'the Stout', earl of Orkney (d. 1014) extended his control over the Hebrides with the loyalty of a 'tributary' earl, Gilli, who resided either in Coll or Colonsay. All that can be inferred is that such an individual would likely have had familiarity with north Mull (Anderson 1922: 502–3; Beveridge 1903: 190–1; Cook 2001: 138, 152–3, 296–7, 301, 307; Holliday 2016: 154). So too with the 'great chieftan' Holdbodi Hundason, who was based in Tiree in the mid-1130s. The *Orkneyinga Saga* describes his relations with Svein Asleifarson. Both would surely have known Mull (Palsson & Edwards 1978: chapters 66, 67, 78, 79, 82; Holliday 2016: 449–50).

Who may have occupied Dun Ara in the Norse period?

Who built or enhanced and occupied the castle? Could that suggest a preceding Norse presence as with the MacAskills at Rubh an Dùnain? The RCAHMS continues that

> Almost nothing is known of the history of this castle, … It is probable, however, that Dun Ara was a stronghold of the MacKinnons, who appear to have been in possession of lands in Mull at least as early as 1354. In the 16th century, if not before, the Mull estates of the MacKinnons were centred upon Mishnish (RCAHMS 1980: 202).

The allusion to 1354 comes from a charter of that year between John MacDonald, Lord of the Isles and John MacDougall of Lorn, which refers

to the MacKinnons. It does not specify that they held lands in Mull but this is implied inasmuch as the charter stipulates that they were to be banned from having custody of the off-shore castle of Cairn na Burgh Mor on the Treshnish Islands (Munro & Munro 1986: xxviii, no. 5, 5–8). It is possible that they were serving as coast-watchers for the MacDonalds – as the MacAskills had for the Macleods. It is worth exploring MacKinnon history to see if there are earlier indications of their interest in the area.

Unlike the MacAskills in Skye, the MacKinnons were Gaelic – not originally of Norse-speaking stock (Sellar 1981: 105–7). They were present in Mull in the time of the clan's 12th-century ancestor, Airbearheartach: one Irish recension of the 1467 manuscript – our principal source for early clan genealogy and origins – recorded that Airbearheartach 'settled twelve households in Fionnlochlainn'. Ronald Black has observed that 'Airbearheartach's Gaelic settlements, then, were in Norwegian territory, or indeed, "among the Norwegians"', in Mull and surrounding areas such as Morvern and Tiree (Black 2015: 6–7, also 12–13. See too Steer & Bannerman 1977: 103–5; McKinnon & McKinnon 2017: 35). It is highly likely that they coalesced with these Norse speakers whom they encountered (Ronald Black pers comm). Whether the Norse had, by this time, already integrated with the peoples they themselves had found is another matter. Recent studies focusing on the Outer Hebrides and Islay in the Inner Hebrides, have emphasised the opposite: that the new colonists from Norway displaced the indigenous population they encountered (Jennings & Kruse 2005; Macniven 2015). So far as Mull is concerned, Alasdair Whyte, on the other hand, was clear that some sort of largely peaceful integration did take place (2017: 2, 66, 75–6, 87–101, 150–3, 220–6. See too Miller 2018: 2, 66-7). Whyte was, however, not concerned with the very north of Mull where, as already noted, ON habitative names are found. This part of the island lies in the 'outer zone' discussed by Jennings & Kruse (2009: 139–44), where Norse remained the dominant language and integration was slower than in the east. This tends to support the view that the area around Dun Ara had been

occupied by the Norse for some two centuries prior to the arrival of Airbearheartach. Like the land around Langamull to the west, the hinterland of Dun Ara is relatively good farming land and would have attracted Norse settlers. This is an important point. Holliday (2017: 18), for example, has recently shown how the prospect of good land was the principal reason why the Norse colonised nearby Tiree: 'the land of barley'.

It is certainly realistic to envisage Airbearheartach and his people integrating with the local Norse. He seems to have supported Somerled, who was at least partly of Norse ancestry. It is reasonable to see Airbearheartach similarly, that is, of fused Norse–Gaelic cultures, a *Gall-Gaedhil* (Steer & Bannerman 1977: 103–5; McDonald 1997: 44; Marsden 2000: 23–9; Woolf 2005: 199–213; *The Scotsman* 2005; Black 2015: 7, 12–13). Both could very likely have been among those preferring to disown or hide their Scandinavian antecedents (see above). However, as it is unknown exactly where Airbearheartach settled among Mull's Norwegians, there is no certainty that Mishnish was involved. Hugh MacDonald of Sleat commented that the MacKinnons only acquired lands in 'Maosinish' at the time of John Mòr's intrigue against his elder brother, Donald, the second Lord of the Isles. A letter of February 1395 from John, reporting that his brother had expelled him, would therefore put the MacKinnon acquisition of Mishnish as late as the early–mid 1390s (MacDonald of Sleat 1914: 32–3; Munro & Munro 1986: 20–1). The Sleat narrative was, however, probably written as late as the 1680s so has to be treated with care (MacGregor 2002: 212 and notes 49 and 115). At any rate, the MacKinnons seem to have been in Mishnish, based principally in Erray, by Tobermory, following a feud with MacLeans – who had allegedly murdered the MacKinnon chief Gilligride mac Fhionghuin around 1350 (Steer & Bannerman 1977: 103–5; Gerald McKinnon pers comm). Dun Ara itself, however, remains obscure: it is only first noted as late as the 17th century when 'family tradition' records it as the burial place of a MacKinnon chief (RCAHMS 1980: 202).

CONCLUSION

The proposition that the 'harbour' and associated settlement at Dun Ara had a Norse provenance, currently depends on comparisons and local context. It may be that more indicators will emerge through further studies of historic harbours and landing places and that more evidence accumulates of the Norse presence in north Mull. These might well combine to advance the present interpretation. Research into the implications of the tidal cycle at other sites, discussed above as it applies to Dun Ara, would be especially interesting. For the present, at any rate, at least it can be suggested that Dun Ara may have been occupied and even developed by Norse-speaking people. It is likely that the complex, focused on the prominent dun and harbour, came to the MacKinnons. It is equally probable that they had Norse familial connections. They would have made good use of Dun Ara, including its harbour, if they did not themselves create it. There is then a case for a Norse-period harbour at Dun Ara. That case may not be proven, yet it remains a fascinating, if problematic, possibility.

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NOTES

1 A note on terminology: *Viking*; *Norse*. The origin and meaning of the word *Viking* is contentious. However, briefly put, it may be acceptable to say that a *víkingr* (m) who was out on *víking* (f), was one who was on a seaborne mission looking for plunder (Brink 2008: 6). Archaeological and historical studies tend to a use of the name *Viking Age* to denote Scandinavian Scotland from its beginning, around AD 800, to about the battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066. The rather more useful heading *Norse period* (from the language), follows on from then, terminating, according to location, with the takeover by the Scottish Crown of areas previously under Norwegian suzerainty (1266 in the western isles; 1468 in the northern isles). These Scandinavian invaders had begun to settle well before 1066, thereby losing a purely *Viking* outlook. It is then more realistic to prefer the term *Norse* in referring to Scandinavians (primarily Norwegian) who lived on Scottish shores.

2 For example, as with the *Orkneyinga Saga*'s allusions to the Brough of Birsay, chs. 31, 32, 52, 56, 57.

3 *Gall* is of course a very common name. For a discussion of its association with Scandinavians in particular, McLeod (2002).

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