

IV.

THE ANTIQUITIES OF THE ST KILDA GROUP OF ISLANDS.

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St Kilda.—The lonely group of islands known as St Kilda, the most westerly land in Scotland, lie 60 miles west of Harris (the nearest port), 32 miles north-west of Monach lighthouse, 46 miles south-west of the Flannan lighthouse, and 140 miles west of the mainland of Scotland. They are so completely removed from the shelter of the nearest land that they get the full blast of the Atlantic storms. This is seen in their configuration, for the coast-line is everywhere so battered and worn that it has now eroded into the high ground, and all the islands are surrounded with a wall of rock, varying in height from 200 to 1300 feet, by far the highest cliffs in the British Isles. The only exception to this is the village bay, opening to the south-east, and sheltered from the prevailing winds. Here there is about 500 yards of shelving rocks, and at the end of the bay a storm beach.

About 100 feet above sea-level, and in crescent form, stands the village of sixteen houses, extending for nearly $\frac{1}{4}$ mile, with the factor's house, church and manse, forming the east end.

Below the middle of this crescent the original village stood. The old houses were of one apartment, the cattle living in the one end and the family in the other. The walls were from 5 to 7 feet thick, and the beds were recesses in the walls. The manure of the cattle and the ashes and refuse in the living part were only removed to the land once a year, in the spring; so high had the floor become by this time that it was with difficulty that man or beast entered.

The furniture of these houses was a quern; a hollow stone for a lamp, called *clach shoilse*, which was filled with oil, and had a cinder of peat for the wick; a vessel of badly burned clay called *cragan* for a pot; a dish to drink out of; a rope of hide, and a stool to sit on.

Thanks to the efforts of Rev. Neil Mackenzie—minister in St Kilda from 1830 to 1843—the inhabitants were persuaded to build better houses. During the demolition of the old village, and the improvement of the land for agriculture, several stone coffins were unearthed. These Mackenzie says were “formed in two different ways.” At times they were formed of four flat stones set on edge and covered with a fifth. At other times both the sides and roof were formed of several stones set in the same way. These were seemingly of different age from

the former. In a few of them bones were found, and in nearly all of them pieces of earthen vessels.

"In clearing a small field at the foot of Oiseval I came on a flat stone under the surface. On the top of it were some ashes, and on lifting it up I saw that there was a curiously built space underneath, but as it might be a relic of some ancient place of worship I did not disturb it but replaced the stones"¹.

Of the three churches mentioned by Martin² not a vestige now remains. Christ Church, which stood close to the earth-house, was the largest of these, and measured 24 feet by 14 feet, and had a tower which was ascended by a stair in the inside. St Columba's stood about 300 feet



Fig. 1. St Kilda: Tobar na Cille, or St Brendans Well.

west of the *Amhuinn Mhòr* (great river) and 500 feet north of the beach, 100 feet above sea-level, and between two cletes.³ I am indebted to John Mackenzie, Esq., F.S.A.Scot., factor for the estate, for pointing out to me the site of these two churches.

The site of St Brendans Church was pointed out to me by Neil Ferguson, the ground officer. It stood on a small promontory near *Amhuinn Ruivival* (Red Fell river), and within the north corner of the most southerly sheepfold, about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile south-west of the village; close to it there is a well (fig. 1) known as *Tobar na Cille* (well of the church).

¹ *St Kilda*, by Rev. Neil Mackenzie, privately printed, 1911.

² *St Kilda*, by Martin Martin, gent., 1698.

³ Clete is a stone building 15 to 25 feet long and 7 to 9 feet wide, the walls leaning towards each other and closed on the top with long stone slabs; the roof was then covered over with turf. There are over 600 of these cletes on the islands. They were originally used to preserve dead birds, but now hay and peats are stored in them.

The St Kildans of long ago used to repair to this well when they wanted a fair wind to take them to Harris; each one stood astride the water,



Fig. 2. St Kilda: Earth-house Entrance.

and when the last man so stood the wind immediately changed into the desired direction.

I failed to find a dressed stone connected with any of the churches, but the St Kildan has no respect for an antiquity of any kind. If he can use it for any modern purpose he will do so, if not he will throw it away.

There is an earth-house about 100 feet north of the graveyard, dug out in sloping ground (figs. 2 and 3). The lower end was filled with refuse, and former excavators thought it ended where the lower two recesses were made, but Mr Cockburn and myself in the course of two afternoons' digging found that it extended another 9 feet at the lower end, making the total length 34 feet. The breadth at bottom is 3 feet

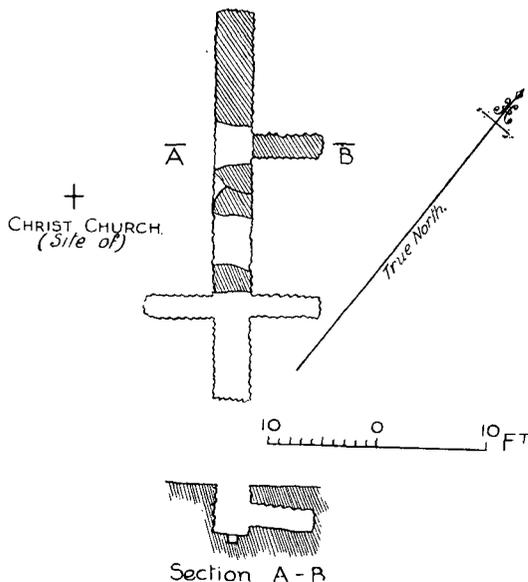


Fig. 3. St Kilda: Plan and Section of Earth-house.

6 inches, and top 2 feet 6 inches, while the height varies from 3 feet 9 inches to 4 feet 6 inches; the three recesses are each 2 feet by 6 feet,

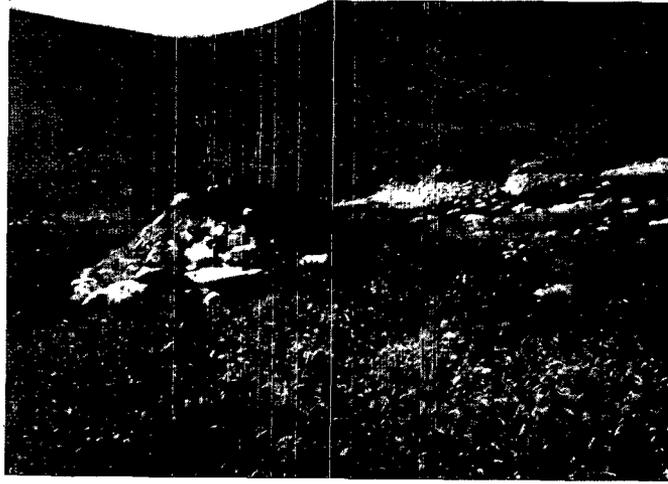


Fig. 4. Calum Mòr's House.

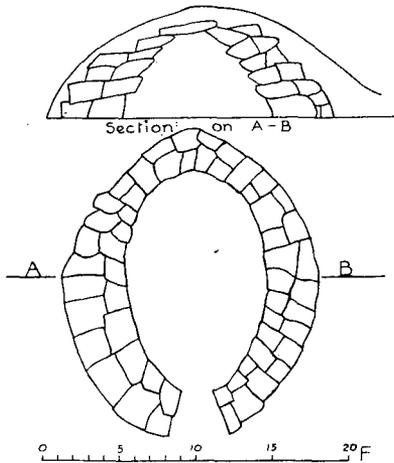


Fig. 5. St Kilda: Plan and Section of Calum Mòr's House.

and the only one now covered is 2 feet 6 inches high. The earth-house has a paved floor, and underneath it a drain 6 inches wide by 5 inches deep.

The next building in the village in the order of age is *Calum Mòr's* (big Calum) house, standing 350 feet north of the graveyard (figs. 4 and 5) and close to the small stream which issues from *Tobar Childa* (Kilda's Well, fig. 6). It is built on the beehive pattern and with huge blocks of stone, some of them weighing half a ton. Inside it measures 14 feet long by 7 feet broad and is half underground.

Going from the village to the great glen on the north side, we pass a huge boulder (fig. 7) known as *Clach a' Bhaïnne* (milking stone). In olden times it was the

custom to pour part of the first spring milking into a hollow in this boulder as a libation to the god *Gruagach* and to ensure the fertility of their cattle. As soon as the milk was poured they could hear the fairies underneath rattling their spoons.

A little farther up the hill there is *Tigh an Triar* (fig. 8) on a green sward, or plain of spells. "Here the old St Kildans implored the



Fig. 6. St Kilda: Tobar Childa, or Kilda's Well.

blessing of God on their cattle, and here they lustrated or sanctified these cattle with salt water and fire. By virtue of this ceremony they conjured away, so they fondly thought, the power of fascinations, the malignity of elves, and the vengeance of every evil genius."¹

On the summit of the col and before entering the glen there is the remains of *Tigh na faire* (watching house). Here in the old days a watchman was kept day and night to protect them from pirates who plundered their sheep and cattle.

At the foot of the great glen, and 100 feet from where *Amhuinn a Ghlinne* (river of the Glen) enters the sea, there is *Tobar nam Buaidh* (well of virtue, fig. 9). "It was a fundamental article of faith" says Macaulay



Fig. 7. St Kilda: Clach a' Bhainne.

that "the water here was a sovereign cure for a great variety of distempers, deafness particularly, and every nervous disease."²

¹ Rev. K. Macaulay, *History of St Kilda*, 1764, pp. 88-9.

² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

There was a so-called altar close by where prayer was made to the genius of the place, and no one approached with empty hands.

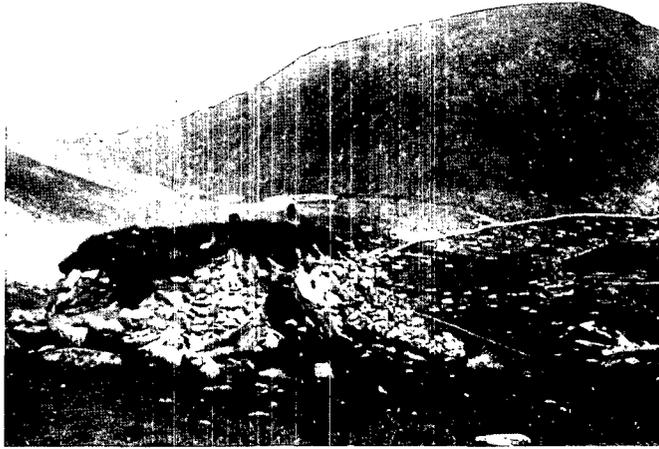


Fig. 8. St Kilda: Tigh an Triar.

The altar has now disappeared but the well is carefully covered over, and the St Kildan of to-day frequently pays it a visit and drinks



Fig. 9. St Kilda: Tobar nam Buaidh, or Well of Virtue.

the water, but in Martin's time (1697) the natives of Harris used to come to this well. About 700 feet south-east of the well is the *Airidh mhòr* (the big shealing). There is here a group of old huts, the most

important of them being the Amazons' House, locally known as *Tigh na Banaghaisgich* (fig. 10). This house is built on the beehive pattern, carefully arched over with stone and covered with turf, so that at a little distance it appears like a green knoll. It is now so dilapidated that my interpretation of it in plan (fig. 11) may not in all particulars agree with the original. What now is the entrance appears as if it at one time formed one of the apartments.

Soay Island.—The name is from old Norse *Saudhr*, sheep, meaning Sheep Isle, of which there are many such names in the western isles. This is probably the most difficult island to land on in the British Isles.

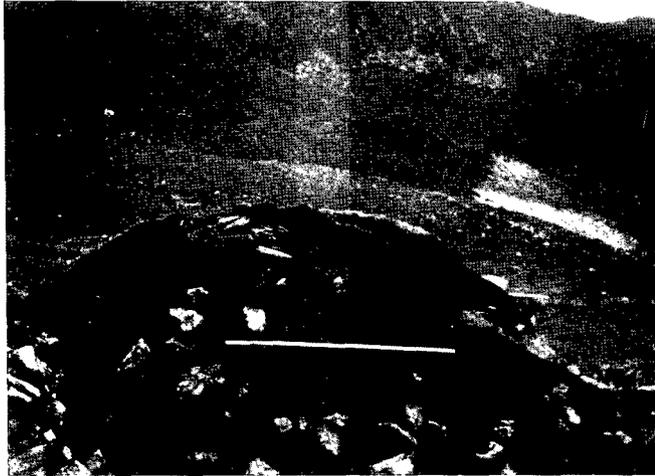


Fig. 10. St Kilda: Tigh na Banaghaisgich, or Amazons' House.

The island is stocked with a breed of sheep of the Mouflon type, a specimen of which can be seen in the Scottish Zoological Park, Edinburgh.

The only building claiming antiquity is another of the so-called altars erected on a level piece of ground, 870 feet above sea-level, and close to a high rock. The building is square and measures 5 feet each way and 3 feet 6 inches in height. There is a fairly clear indication that the altar was closed in with a turf wall measuring 30 feet north and south and 20 feet east and west, the altar being at the north end.

The only other antiquarian site is a cave known as *Tigh Dugan*, (Duncan's house). Duncan is said to have been one of two wretches who conceived the idea of getting rid of all the people on the island, inveigled them into the church, and then set fire to it. The story relates that one woman, *Caillich Bheag Ruaival* (old wife of Ruaival) escaped and related what had happened when the first boat from the mainland

arrived. The two men were taken and one placed on the bare rock known as *stac an Armin*, from which he was seen to jump into the sea and drown; the other was taken to Soay, and many years after his bones and his dirk were found in the cave called after his name.

Boreray.—This island which lies over four miles to the north-east of St Kilda is the most difficult in the group to land on, except Soay,¹ for after the boat is brought against a steep rock and a footing obtained, there is still 300 feet of broken rock to climb before reaching the steep grassy top. The only antiquity now to be seen is the Staller house, situated towards the north-west of the island. The name Staller is Norse, *Hailir* a shed, and has nothing to do with "one Staller a hermit."² The house is similar to the Amazons' on St Kilda, but much larger, and capable, according to local tradition, of accommodating eighteen persons.

The entrance is now closed up, and it would probably take two men at least a week to excavate the part fallen in. It is said to go under ground for 18 feet, and the local tradition is that there was an entrance to it from the sea cave which is 700 feet below.

A stone was found on this island with an inscription upon it. I made a search for some hours hoping to find this precious relic, but failed.

There was also another so-called altar and a stone circle mentioned by Macaulay; but the St Kildan has no respect for antiquities, and the chances are that both places have been used as quarries for material to build their huts, of which there are a great number on this island.

The Dùn Island.—This island guards the entrance to the harbour, and is separated from the main island of St Kilda by a channel 300 feet wide. It extends for $\frac{7}{8}$ of a mile, and varies in width from 100 feet to 200 feet. On a very narrow ridge in the middle, and 213 feet above sea-level, stood yet another of these altars of which not one stone now remains. Mr Neil Ferguson pointed out the spot to me, which is close to a large basalt-boulder almost 4 feet each way and 3 feet high. About 400 feet from the south-east end of this land the natural

¹ Sir Robert in *Phil. Trans.*, 1678.

² *St Kilda*, by Rev. Kenneth Macaulay, p. 54.

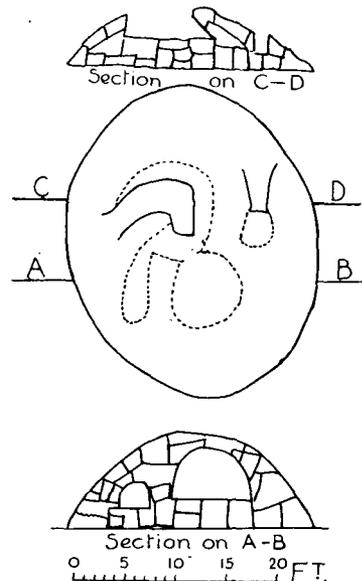


Fig. 11. St Kilda: Plan and Sections of the Amazons' House.

barrier of rock is strengthened by making a wall between the interstices of the rock (fig. 12).

This wall looks quite modern, and it is very difficult to understand what was the object of building it. There is nothing inside but two small caves, and no sign that these were ever used for habitation. There is no water.

Some of the old inhabitants have a tradition that this was a fort with wooden guns. I am inclined to the view that the wall was simply for the purpose of temporarily separating the sheep on the island.

Early occupation of the St Kilda Islands.—There is no reliable record to show who were the first settlers on these islands, but some information may be gathered from the place-names. The important Celtic names are *Hirta*, the old name for St Kilda, which Professor Watson explains as “death, gloom”—perhaps a relic of the old idea that the land of spirits



Fig. 12. St. Kilda: Wall at end of Dùn.



Fig. 13. Mortar for bruising barley.

lay beyond the sea. *Dùn*, a fort, is applied to the long island. *Conachair* (the coming together of mountain masses) applies to the highest hill (1396 feet) on the island, and *Camber* (a bend) is the name given to the bent promontory at the north-west end of the main island. Turning to the Norse names we have *Kilda*¹ (a well), first appearing on a map of 1558; *Boreray* (the north isle); *Soay* (sheep isle), now the only place in the British Isles where the ancient Norwegian or Mouflon sheep breed. The

hill above the villages is *Oiseval* (east fell), *Ruival* (red fell), *Gil* (a ravine), *Dal* (a dale), occur many times, clearly showing that the Norse-

¹ *History of the Celtic Place-names of Scotland*, by W. J. Watson, M.A., LL.D.

men must have been in complete occupation of the islands for a long time. The few Celtic names indicate that the Celt was the first settler.



Fig. 14. Grinding meal.

The oats were ground in a hand-mill by two women who by working hard could grind a barrel of meal in a day. My illustration, fig. 14, shows two men grinding; I could not persuade the women to pose for my photograph.

The only other object of interest shown to visitors is the house where Lady Grange¹ lived during her eight years' imprisonment on the island. The original house was roofed with timber, and when it fell in it was rebuilt as a clete. I am told the doorway and the left-hand side (fig. 15) are the same as when her ladyship lived in it, but the original wooden lock is at Dunvegan Castle, Skye.

The position of the antiquities mentioned above is shown on the six-inches-to-a-mile map of the St Kilda group, published in the R.S.G.S. magazine for March 1928 and by the Ordnance Survey Department.



Fig. 15. Lady Grange's House, now a Clete.

¹ For the full story of her tragic life see *Proc. S. A. Scot.*, vol. x. p. 722; vol. xi. p. 595; vol. xii. p. 312.