

AN CAISTEAL: AN IRON AGE FORTIFICATION IN MULL

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OVERLOOKING a small area of farmland behind Bunessan, in SW. Mull, there is a steep ragged slope out of which juts a crag known locally as An Caisteal (NM 387216). The flat top, which is about 200 ft. above sea-level, is only 30 ft. across and is very much exposed to the weather, but it has in the past been strongly fortified by a great thickness of dry-stone walling on the vulnerable flank (Pl. IX). The plan (fig. 1), prepared by Mr Gordon Petrie of Glasgow University Geography Department, shows that cliffs form a natural defence over the northern half of the crag, but to the south there is only a short slope down to a grassy saddle before the ground resumes its rise to the higher moorland behind. The fortifications on this side were first noted by Mr O. Martin, Bunessan, and the site has been included by Mrs U. V. G. Betts in her survey of Mull sites.

A most remarkable feature is the way in which the crag top and the walling are completely overlooked by the rocks to the S., only 30 to 50 yds. distant; as with many other duns on the W. coast of Scotland, the obvious conclusion appears to be that the defences were against assailants with sword and spear and not with bow and sling. It is equally important to note that the walling is almost completely hidden behind the crag when viewed from the lower ground to the N. even at quite close range. A third significant point is the value of the crag as a look-out. There is a magnificent view, north-westwards over the sea towards Staffa, northwards to the opening of Loch Scridain with its three galleried duns and several other fortifications, and eastwards over a wide expanse of moorland with some patches of cultivation. The primary concern may well have been with the sea raider.

It was obvious before excavation that the walling had been carefully blended with the natural rock faces of the crag especially in the SE. and again in the W. near the entrance passage (fig. 2). Though the site was much littered with displaced slabs and some recent disturbance had occurred, the masonry in one place seemed to be 13 ft. thick and there were suggestions of construction within the thickness of the walling itself, as of a gallery and cell. Only the outer end of the entrance passage could be located, near the cliff, but it was no less than 5½ ft. wide; checks and bar-slot were suspected. It was abundantly clear, however, that an adequate plan would be possible only after excavation.

An Caisteal seemed to pose in concise terms a general problem in Scottish archaeology. It is well known that many western duns are so small, or are so located, that permanent occupation seems hardly to have been contemplated and the primary function in terms of the settlement pattern of the period is hard to recognise. This bleak, restricted crag had been so strongly fortified that no casual look-out station could be involved, but equally it seemed singularly inappropriate for a domestic structure comparable in function to the peel tower of the Borders in a later period.

When the writer was invited to undertake a relatively small excavation in con-

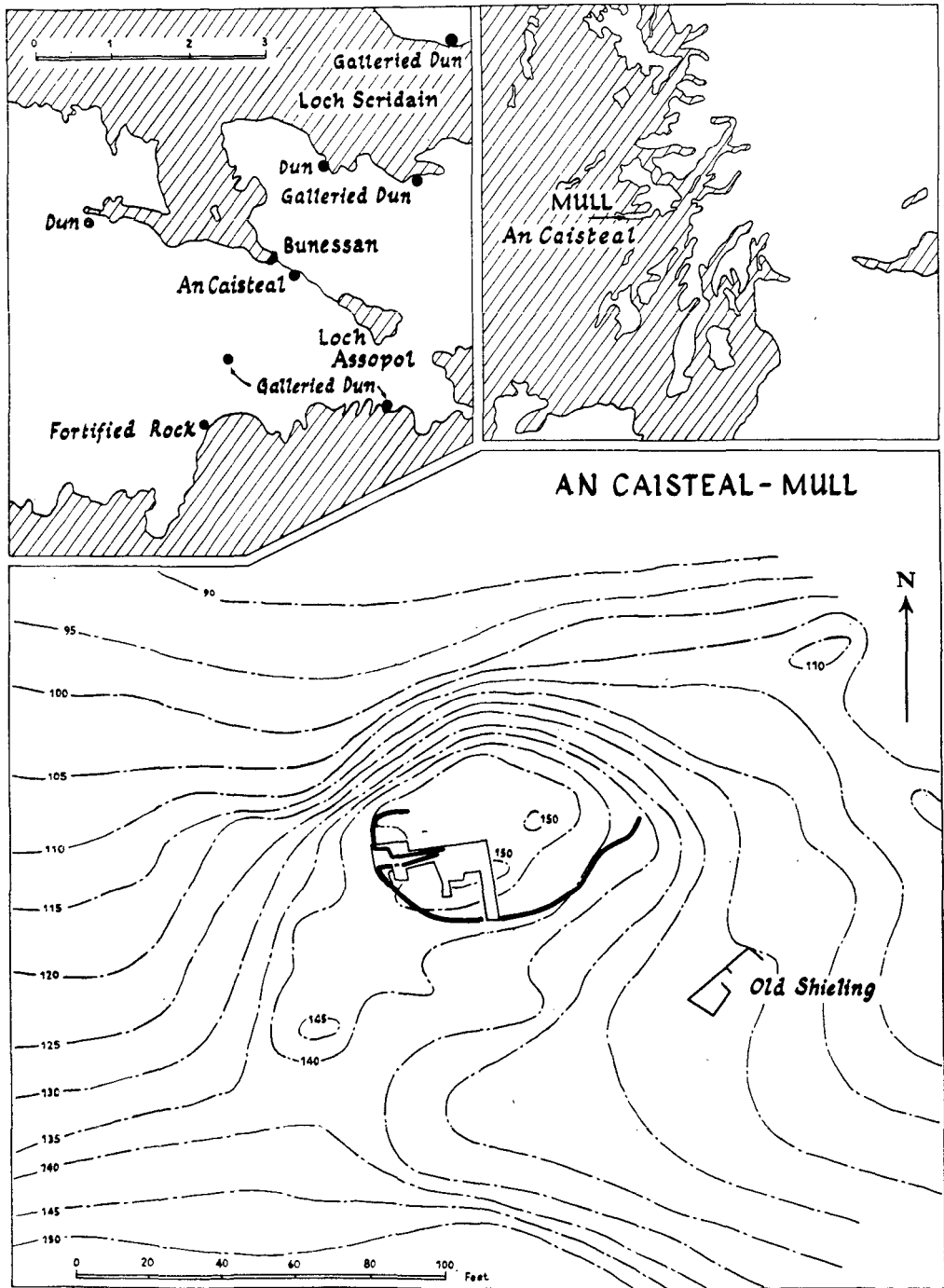


FIG. 1. The site of An Caisteal, from a survey by Mr Gordon Petrie

junction with the newly formed Mull Field Club, An Caisteal seemed an obvious choice. Colonel and Mrs Betts, Mr O. Martin and Mr A. MacCallum assisted in the work. The investigations were carried out during the first fortnight of September 1960 in relatively fair weather.

THE EXCAVATIONS

On the S. side of the crag, the walling forming the fortifications appeared to be about 13 ft. thick; the remains of the outer revetment showed clearly just above turf well down the slope, but only a short row of slabs suggested the inner face. Excavations were commenced in the SW. sector of the interior (fig. 2) to establish the nature of the inner face and to follow it westwards to the entrance passage, the corner of which could not be located. The surface growth was of short heather and grass, on compact peat from 3 in. to as much as 14 in. deep.

The row of slabs certainly formed a vague 'face', but it was rarely more than a foot high and only a very few fallen slabs occurred inside to suggest that it was ever much higher. It was not founded on bedrock but in stone chippings. Eastwards, it rapidly deteriorated to a line of packing stones along the edge of the flat top of the crag. Westwards, the alignment, which was not strictly preserved, curved round to the SE. corner of the entrance passage which reached much further into the interior than was expected, so that the walling through which the passage ran reached the extraordinary thickness of 21 ft.

Continued excavation in the interior showed that the crag top had originally been very irregular, with rounded protrusions of weathered mica schist separated by cleft-like hollows. This surface had been levelled, rather casually and certainly without a paving, with a filling of stones, rubble, stone chippings and even perhaps peat at the top. Burnt and cracked stones, some large smooth pebbles, peat ash and a very little wood charcoal occurred but did not conform to any traceable horizon and there was only the merest trace of compact earth. At least three crude hearths were noted, at different levels, but only the one nearest the entrance (fig. 2) was at all clearly demarcated and even here the ash spread far along the floor of the entrance passage and, most significantly, over the top of the slabs of the 'inner face'. Besides this hearth and immediately beneath the peat there was a perfect upper quern stone and directly under it a fragment of crude pottery. Otherwise, there was no sign of an occupation deposit in the ordinary sense (Pl. X: 1).

A more minute description is pointless. It is obvious that An Caisteal was not a walled enclosure of the type of many W. coast duns. The 'inner face' was never the revetment to a screening wall nor even a breastwork; it was simply the inner edge of massive masonry forming a built-up scarp to the levelled top of the crag. The fortification consisted essentially of a well-protected summit platform embodying the more or less level top of the crag which had been extended outwards by dry-stone walling where the natural contour of the crag demanded it. The hearth by the entrance may well have been a watch fire but the other ash deposits can hardly have been more than the cooking fires of the builders.

To examine the character of the dry-stone walling fortifying the crag, a strip 3 ft.

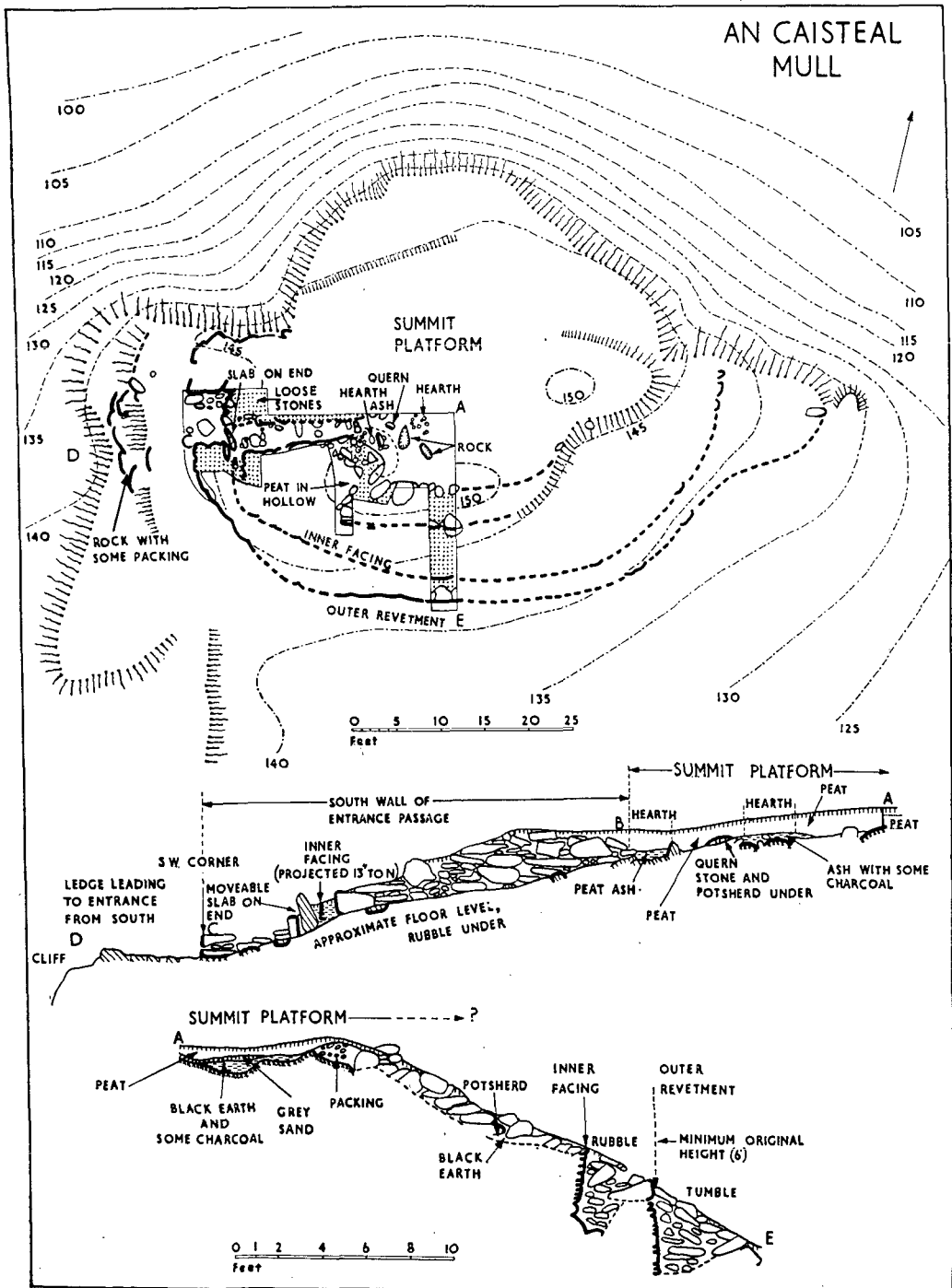


FIG 2. The excavations, and profiles

wide was cleared of loose stone and earth to allow a profile to be examined from the centre of the interior to the limit of the fortifications (Profile A – E, fig. 2). Immediately behind the pseudo-inner face, large and quite firmly fixed slabs seemed to indicate that the summit platform had not here been seriously disturbed by stone robbers. The slabs continued downwards and outwards for about 7 ft. where there were suggestions of a rough step or extremely shallow scarp, at the foot of which another fragment of pottery was found in a small pocket of black earth. On the line of the profile the indications were almost too slight to attract attention, but eastwards a row of packing stones clearly curved upwards to the edge of the crag near its pointed eastern extremity (as shown in fig. 2). Westwards, too, clear traces of this slight downward step continued for about 11 ft. and then it simply petered out. It seems to represent the ruined edge of the summit platform, perhaps an outward facing scarp 3 to 4 ft. high.

Below, firmly placed slabs continued downwards and outwards as before until, only a yard behind the line of the outer revetment, there occurred a hidden facing about 3 ft. high of carefully placed unweathered slabs which, on the line of the profile, had been forced outwards in an overhang, presumably by the thrust of the loose stone core of the walling behind (Pl. X: 2). The foundations seemed to lie on stones within the core rather than on the surface of the crag, though this could not be verified without an extensive dismantling of the walling, which could not be contemplated. Superficial investigations allowed the line of this hidden facing to be traced as shown in fig. 2. Eastwards it led to more packing stones along the outer edge of a natural shelf some 6 ft. below the level of the top of the crag, and on to the edge of the cliffs where further fortification was unnecessary. Westwards, the line continued in a rather curious course only vaguely parallel to the outer revetment. It petered out just behind the S. wall of the entrance passage, where it was quite clearly founded on loose rubble.

Before discussing the function of this hidden facing, the true outer revetment to the walling must be examined. On the line of the profile, it was preserved to a height of 4 ft. but large slabs in the collapse outside suggested that the original height may well have exceeded 6 ft. or even 7 ft. The slabs forming the face were carefully laid to form a batter of 1 horizontally to 8 vertically, and gave an appearance of rough coursing; some of the gaps between the larger stones had been carefully packed with thin slats of rock. This outer face was more strongly constructed than the hidden facing behind. The outer revetment could be followed without difficulty round to the entrance passage, where another well-preserved stretch was bared from the collapse to establish the height in relation to the corner, which was badly ruined. Eastwards, the task of establishing the line was difficult, partly because stone robbing had occurred in constructing a relatively recent sheiling or dairy, now in ruins, in the grassy hollow nearby, and even more serious may have been the quarrying at the time when a small group of abandoned cottages was built some 200 to 300 yds. to the NE. In addition, the slope from the top of the crag became progressively steeper on approaching the cliffs in this sector, and the original walling may never have been on the same massive scale. The line as finally decided (fig. 2), diverged notably from

that of the facing behind, which must have functioned as a second line of defence on this steeper slope.

At first sight it seems easy to visualise the inner facing as a second scarp and line of defence, all the way round behind the true outer revetment. But as Mrs Betts, with her experience of the Naga peoples of NE. India, was quick to point out, a second scarp so close to the fighting platform provided by the outer revetment would have seriously impeded the movements of sword and spearmen with whom we seem to be concerned. The alternative appears to be to interpret this hidden facing as a structural feature which was not carried up above the height of the outer face except in the E. of the fort. Its function would then be to strengthen the outer part of the walling with its loose stone core, taking some of the outward thrust as, quite obviously, the facing had done where it was bowed outwards on the line of the profile. The writer has earlier discussed the purpose of interior walling of this type in connection with the galleried dun at Kildonan.¹ Here, however, the 'median face' looked inwards and may well have been carried upwards as a breastwork; nevertheless, the conclusion was 'that both the median face and the gallery serve a similar structural function'.

Turning now to the entrance passage which was excavated throughout, several points are to be considered. In the first place, the passage does not represent a direct approach to the top of the dun; it lies only a yard or so from the cliff edge and would be completely hidden from assailants approaching the vulnerable side of the crag. It would have had to be approached in the first place along a narrow ledge of rock, largely natural but in part built up with packing stones. This would have forced the assailants to move in single file, under the very face of the outer revetment, with the shield arm turned to the wrong side. Then, at the end, there would have come a blind corner turning into the entrance passage itself. This arrangement seems too consistent to be fortuitous.

The form of the entrance passage over its great length of 21 ft. was difficult to determine precisely, because of the collapse of much of the N. revetment walling: it was with difficulty that even foundation stones were recognised in the middle portion. The S. wall was still standing 2½ ft. high near the upper end (see Profile A-D fig. 2), though the masonry was of poor quality, so much so in fact, that it is difficult to visualise the irregular blocks ever rising much above present level. At the outer corners of the passage, however, massive blocks had been employed and there can be little doubt that the outer face was originally at least 5 to 6 ft. high. The floor was cobbled at the outer end, but higher up large stones formed a very rough stepping; these were rather loose and the flooring generally did not seem to have been consolidated by treading. Apart from blown ash at the upper end, there was very little in the way of an occupation deposit and no artifacts whatever were recovered.

Near the lower end the passage suddenly widened, probably in the form of a right angle corner as shown on the plan. On the S. side, directly opposite this expansion, two relatively large slabs were still in position and showed above the turf; the upper one was a large block and the lower was a slab firmly placed on end (Pl. X: 3).

¹ *P.S.A.S.*, LXXIII (1938-9), 196.

Between was a space 1 ft. 9 in. wide out of which jutted a third huge slab on end (38 by 22 by 7 in.). Behind was a hollow in the turf which might have suggested a collapsed cell; recent disturbance was in fact the reason for the hollow, but it was during the investigation of this point that the end of the interior facing was located as shown of fig. 2. When the huge slab on end was cleared of earth around it, it appeared curiously at odds with the stonework on either side; it did not resemble a door check which had been originally suspected. A quarter of a turn on its end would have rotated it out of the passage into the space between the two blocks mentioned above, almost as though it were a movable obstacle to span the passage.

A second slab of very similar dimensions (42 by 21 by 9 in.) lay flat on the floor between the outer corners of the passage; slip from the SW. corner was suspected and it was edged there out of the way, but it proved a misfit. Again, parallel to the N. wall, at the outer end of the passage, was a low but distinct stop ridge, occupying about a foot of the passage (fig. 2 and Pl. X: 4). What could be the purpose, even if it housed the second great slab, it is difficult to see. Equally difficult to explain is the wide open end of the entrance passage as a whole. It is only after much deliberation that movable stone obstacles have been suggested in this report, but it might be that a parallel case will emerge to confirm a suspicion at An Caisteal.

ARTIFACTS

Pottery. Two small sherds and three fragments were found, all coarse, reddish brown, gritted with minute pebbles and, under the microscope, with impressions of fine roots or possible grass in the body of the clay. One sherd, 1 in. across, is .35 in. thick between smoothed surfaces: the other, 1.3 in. across is shapeless except for one smooth face but might be part of a base.

Upper Rotary Quern Stone. This came from immediately beneath the surface peat in the interior, near the inner end of the entrance passage. It is an almost perfect specimen, of mica schist, slightly elongated around the handle hole where the measurement across is 13.9 in. as against 12.6 in. at right angles. The spindle hole and feed is 4 in. across at the top, narrowing to 1.5 in. on the underside which is slightly convex (by about $\frac{1}{4}$ in.). The handle hole is 1.5 in., narrowing to .4 in. at the underside. The edges of the flat stone are bevelled and it is only about 1.75 in. thick. This suggests that the stone was well worn and it is possible that the handle hole was originally only a depression which now reaches through to the underside as a result of long wear.

Stone with cup-shaped depression – from a drill? A piece of mica schist, much altered by fire, measuring 3 by 1.45 by 1.35 in. and triangular in cross section, has on one flat side a cup-shaped depression measuring 0.4 in. across and 0.3 in. deep; there is clear evidence of wear. Mrs Betts immediately suggested that it was the upper bearing stone, held in the hand, for a drill. This identification has rarely if ever been made on an Iron Age site, but small stones with holes bored through, or with cup depressions, are all too common, suggesting that drilling tools were in general use.

Smoothing Stones. A number of very smooth pebbles occurred, two characteristic examples measuring 3 by 2.1 by 1.1 in. and 3.3 by 2.1 by 1 in.

Carbon. Only a very small quantity of wood charcoal was obtained from the interior and entrance passage.

THE PURPOSE AND AGE OF AN CAISTEAL

Essentially, the small flat top of the crag in its natural state had been strengthened and regularised by massive scarped faces on the southern, vulnerable, side to provide a most effective strong point and look-out station (suggested reconstruction fig. 3).

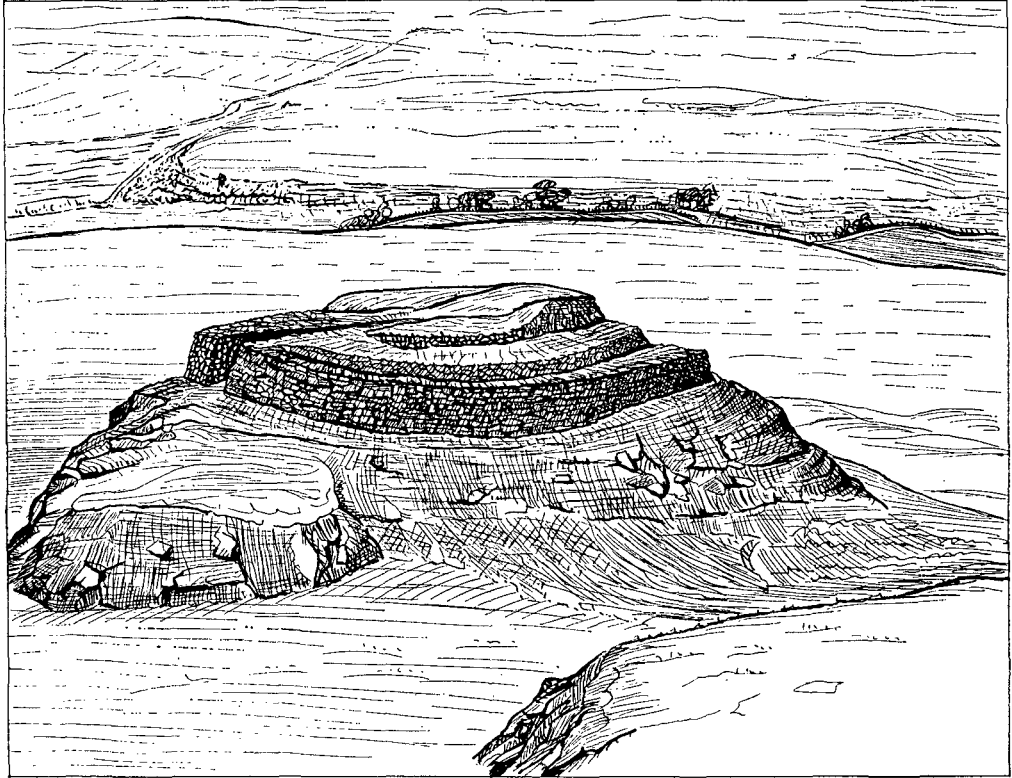


FIG. 3. Suggested reconstruction (drawing by Mr J. S. Keates)

The magnificent view towards the sea, the overlooking rocks to the S., and, perhaps, the fact that the artificial defences are practically invisible from the land below, all point to the fear of raiders from the sea. The crag was never the home of some petty chieftain, nor the temporary refuge of a small community; it was meant to be held by a few resolute men while other folk took to the hills with the livestock until danger had passed.

An Caisteal can hardly be unique amongst W. coast duns; many are so restricted or so inaccessible that a similar function can be envisaged, and it is surely useful to have established the essential character of one. It might even be suggested that the evidence for regarding many W. coast fortifications as either homesteads or habitation

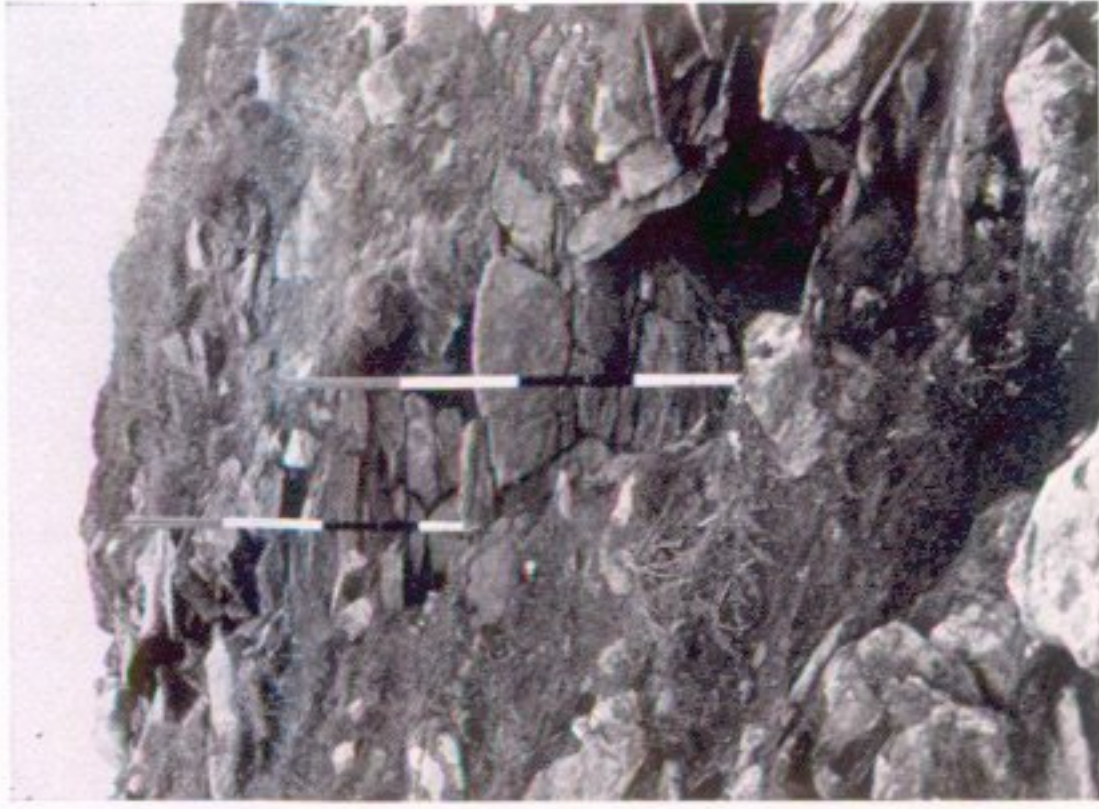
sites for small communities is none too secure. So often excavation has resulted in a pitifully small collection of artifacts, which has made dating so difficult. The poverty of the inhabitants, Scottish weather and soil conditions, bad excavation technique, the general use of wood and leather instead of metal and pottery, all have been blamed. The true function of many of the forts and duns simply as strong-points may be the explanation, and the ordinary dwellings have perhaps escaped recognition on the ground today, or have been more thoroughly destroyed more often than we care to believe. To find the sites of ordinary farmhouses in existence only two hundred years ago, with a surveyed plan to help, can prove most difficult, as the writer has learned from experience.

As regards the date of An Caisteal, it is not possible even to specify a period with any conviction. Detailed analysis seems to indicate a skilful use of natural rock faces and steep slopes to economise in the use of massive dry-stone walling. The technique of fortification seems well developed for a date early in the Iron Age and might point more to the period of the nuclear forts than to that of the few *proven* examples of pre-Roman native forts. The quern stone in the present state of our knowledge is of little help; these objects turn up with almost unfailing regularity and their typology, difficult though it may be, might warrant more study. One recalls an upper quern stone from the foundations of the galleried dun at Kildonan as not dissimilar from the present example, and especially in view of the 'interior facing', it is tempting to think once more in terms of a later 'Iron Age' in the Post-Roman or Early Christian period of the Western Highlands and Islands of Scotland. This may be guesswork, but even with scientific aids we cannot hope for a date without well baked hearths and with little more than a trace of charcoal. Further excavation on similar sites and the discovery of closer parallels seems to offer the only hope of more precise dating.



General view after excavation from the higher ground to the south

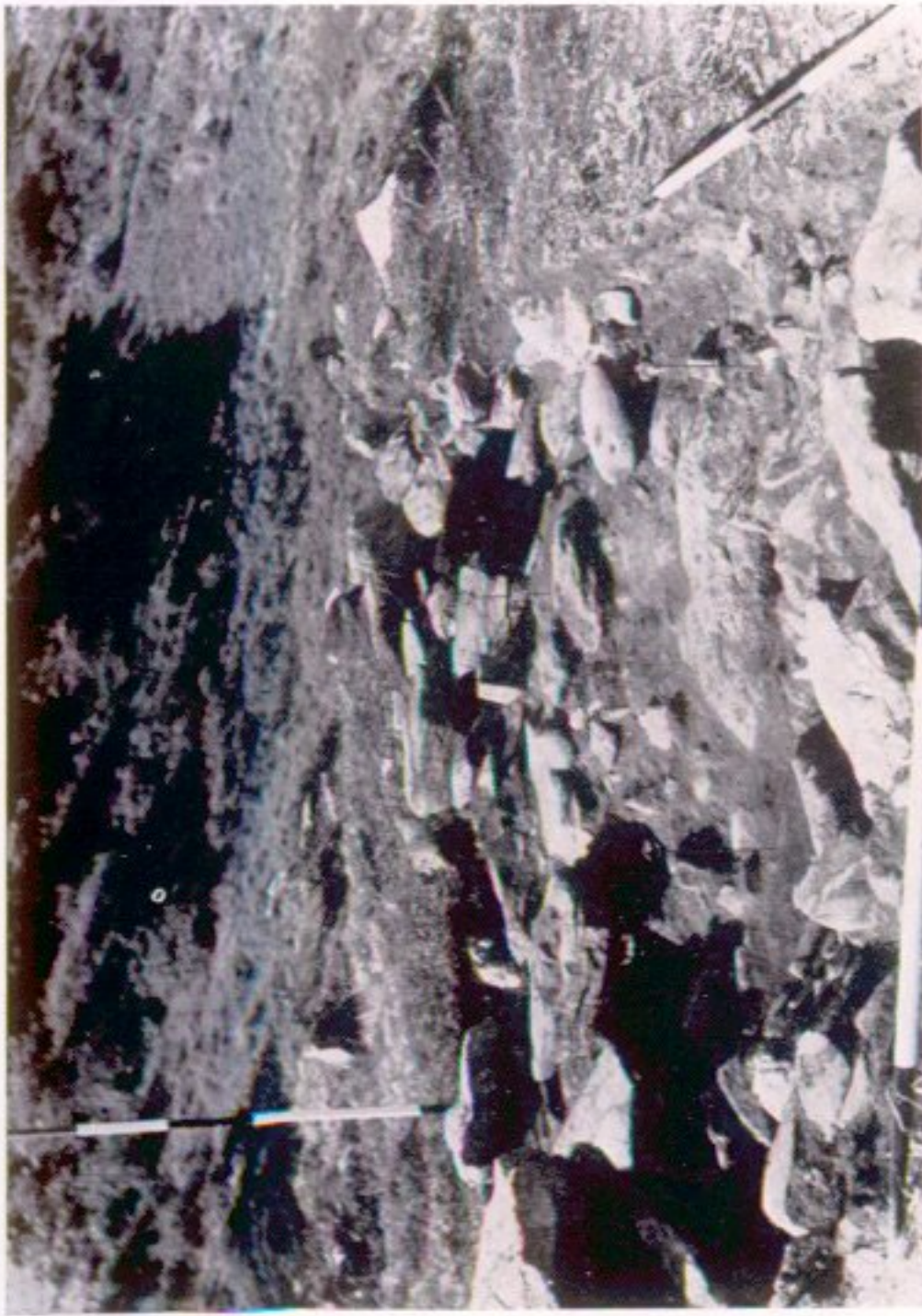
FAIRHURST: AN CAISTEAL, MULL.



2. The outer defences on the south side with the double outer revetment exposed



4. The outer end of the entrance passage, north side; the cliff falls away just beyond



1. The south west interior, showing rock outcrops, the ragged inner edge of the revetment, and a hearth (arrow) at the inner end of the entrance



3. The south side of the entrance passage, looking inward, with the rotating slab on end, and behind, to the right, the limit of the inner face of the revetment