

Iron-age finds from the Isle of Lewis

by M Carson

MANGERSTA NGR NB 009311 (figs 1-3)

During the summers of 1974, 1975 and 1976 a number of finds were made at Mangersta in the parish of Uig, Isle of Lewis. All the finds were unstratified, and hence no relative chronology is possible. The Atlantic side of this part of the Island is mainly a rocky coastline with cliffs, and only a few bays suitable for drawing up boats. One of these is Mangersta, a sandy bay enclosed by cliffs and facing SW. It is about 150 m wide and over 500 m deep. On the 1852 edition of the OS map there is a 'ruin' marked where the sheepfold now stands, and there is a local tradition that there were old houses here before the Clearances. The present settlement is further N, in a shallow valley that gives some shelter to the W. It was originally served by a track from the S across the sands of the bay, through the site, but a new road was built across the moor earlier this century.

The finds consist of potsherds, a comb, and two fragments of bronze. All the finds were on the surface, and the pottery is broken into small fragments. There is evidence of occupation levels in the eroded face of the dune, but no sign of any structures, or building stone. On the sand were areas of black, possibly peat ash. Associated with the finds were a large number of shells, fish and animal bones.

Pottery. Some of the sherds are decorated, with applied or incised decoration, and are illustrated. Others are crudely made, and have the marks of having been heavily panned down. The fabric colours are predominantly red, or buff, although a number of sherds are grey. The applied decoration is the characteristic Hebridean zig-zag pattern around the body of the pot. Several are decorated by rows of slashes in various patterns (nos 16, 23, 64, 65, 103). One has been decorated with a row of imprints of the end of a small hollow bone or similar implement (no. 22). The incised decoration is in various forms: there are straight lines inscribed horizontally, vertically, or diagonally, and sometimes in the 'herring-bone' pattern (nos 11, 107). Three of the rims are decorated by slashes on the outside of the rim (nos 30, 35) or on the inside (no. 33). Three sherds are indented; a rimsherd is lightly indented on the top (no. 32), another has an arc on the outside (no. 105), whilst another sherd, possibly a base, has a finger-print firmly impressed on it (no. 21). The majority of the rims are of simple upright section and commonly flat topped, but several are sharply everted and there are a few bead rims. One unusual rim is 'hammer-headed' in section and of brick red colour (no. 89).

Antler. The antler comb (no. 1), originally a long-handled comb, has been cut down and now measures 49 mm by 36 mm. Originally there were 13 teeth but the eight central teeth are missing, suggesting that they were broken off during use, and there are signs of wear between the teeth perhaps due to the warp thread. There is no decoration on it.

Another piece of bone about 62 mm long had been sharpened at each end, perhaps for use in the decoration of pottery (no. 73). There was also a sawn-off length of antler.

Bronze. A segment of a Norse oval brooch (no. 72) in a good state of preservation was found. It is very similar to the woman's brooch from a grave on Islay, rather than the pair of brooches from Valtos, only 10 km to the NE. A tiny piece of beaten bronze, 19 mm by 16 mm, was also found. It is less than $\frac{1}{2}$ mm thick, slightly convex, but has no distinguishing features.

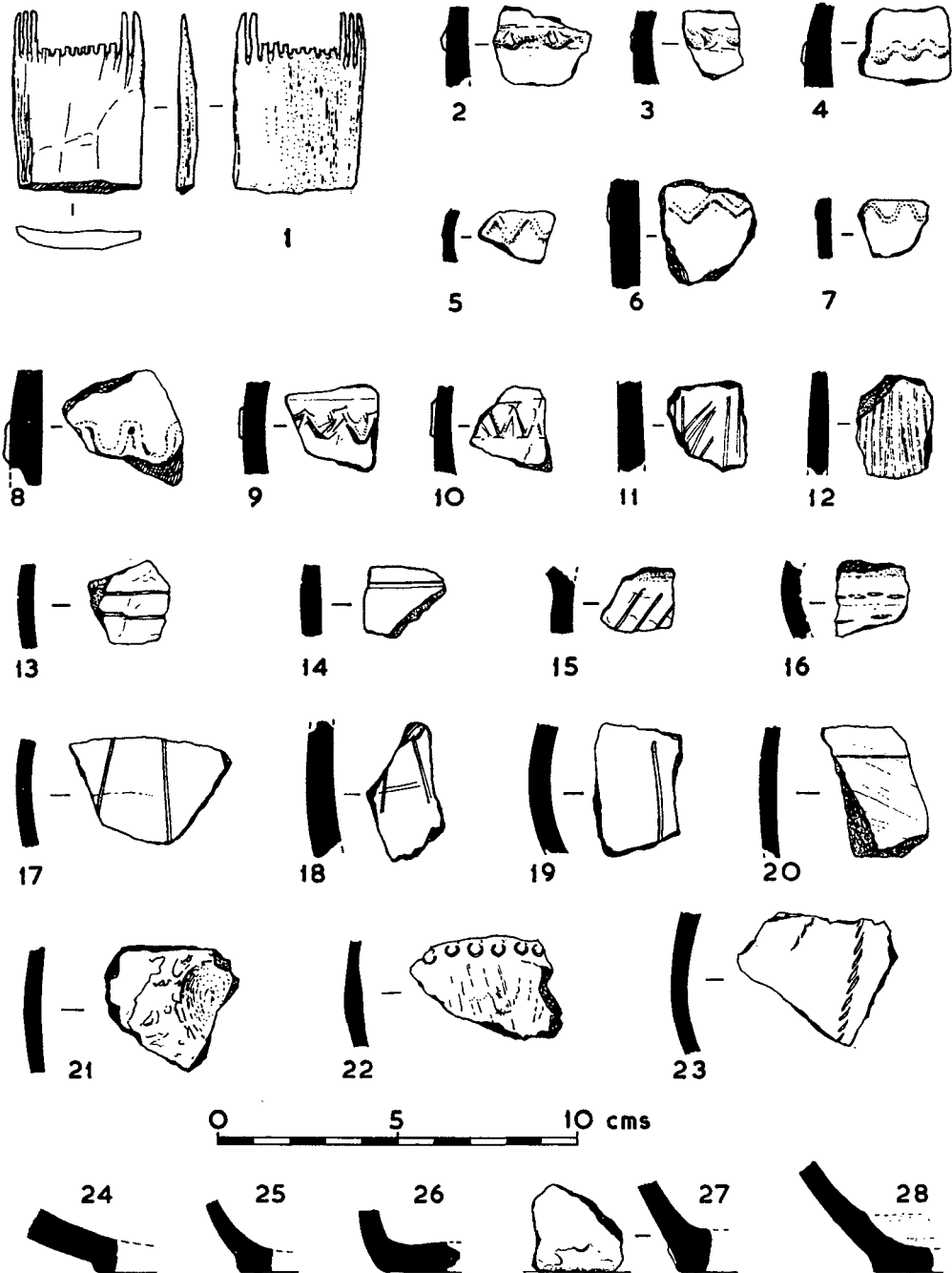


FIG 1 Iron-age finds from Mangersta, Lewis

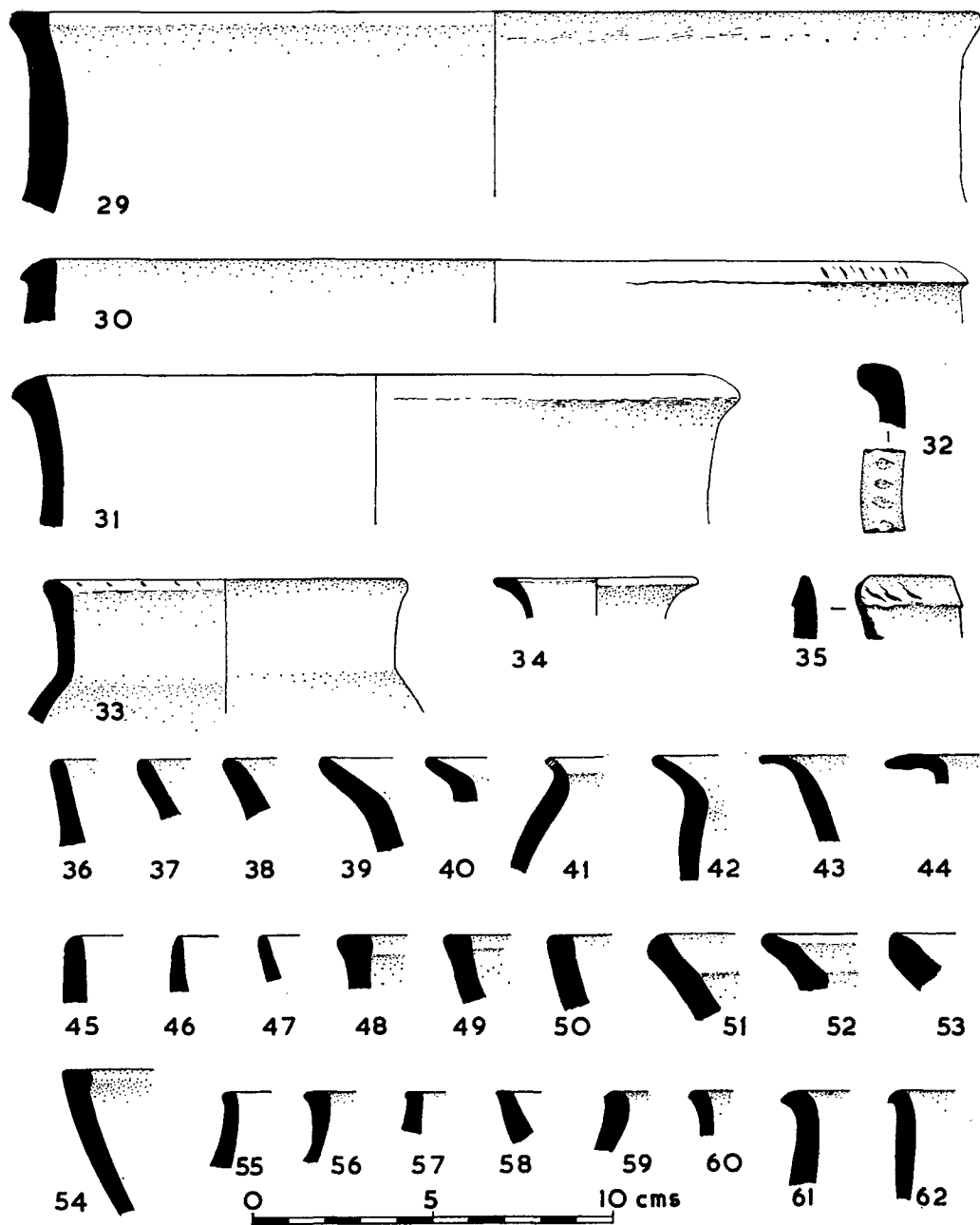


FIG 2 Iron-age finds from Mangersta, Lewis

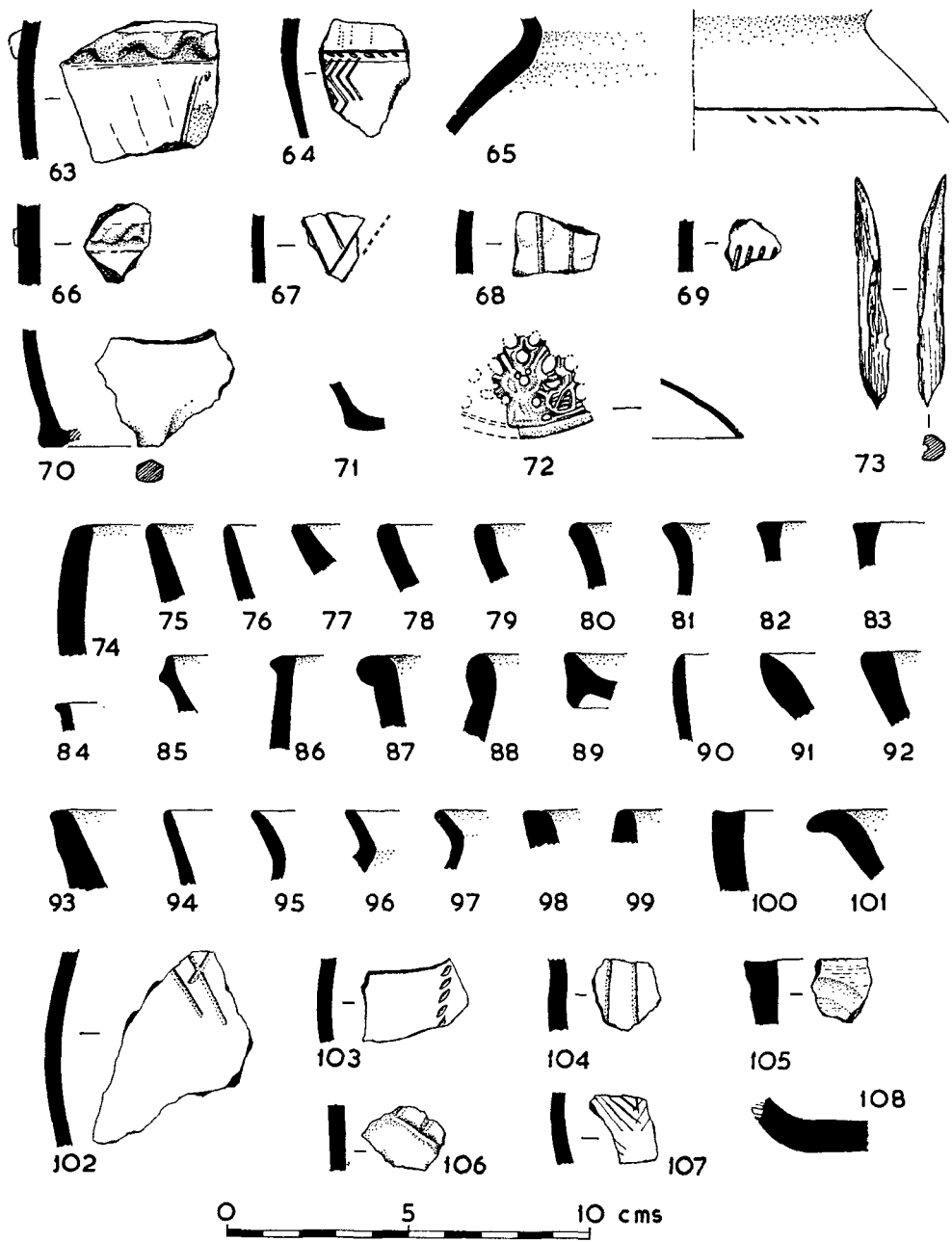


FIG 3 Iron-age finds from Mangersta, Lewis

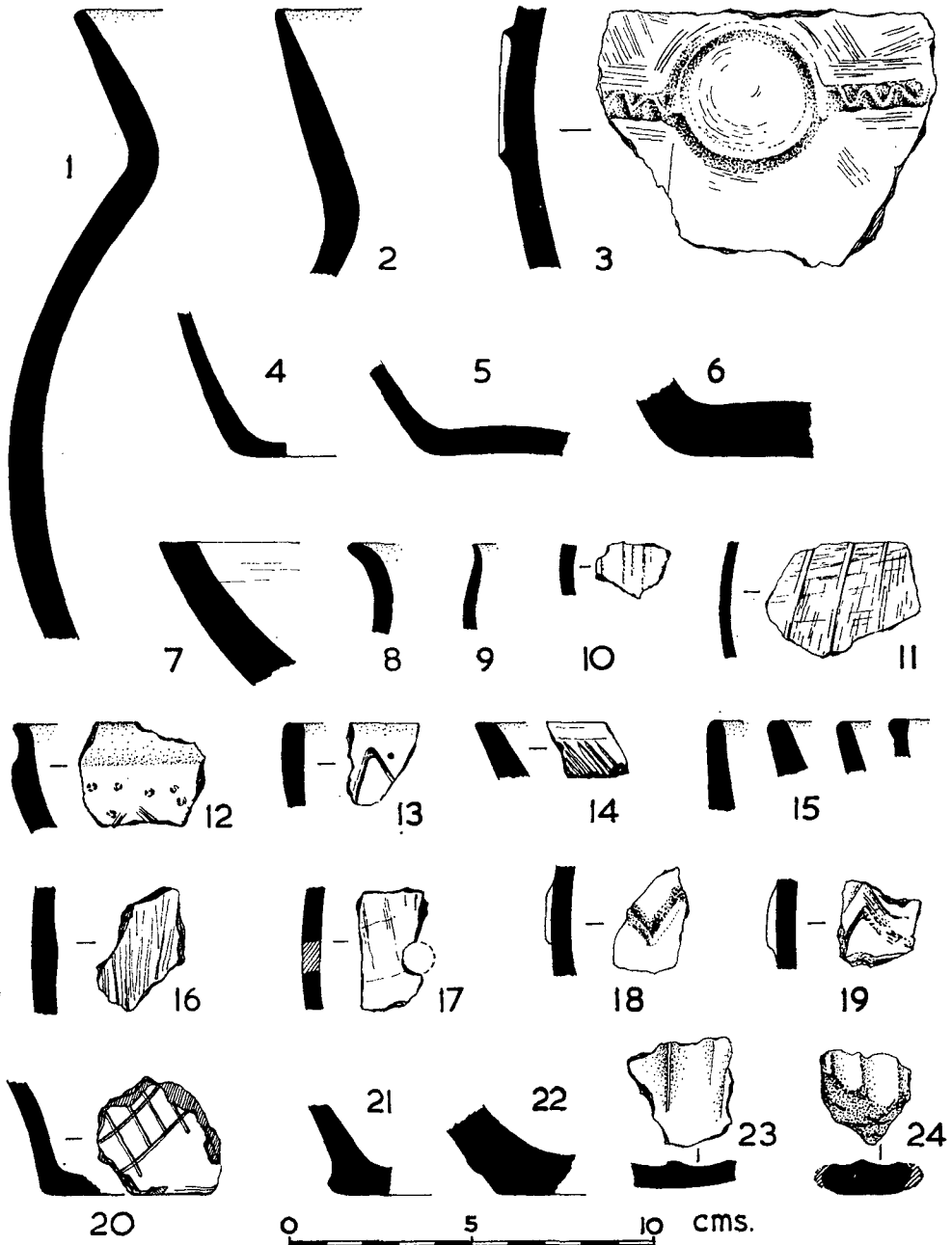


FIG 4 Iron-age finds from Lewis: 1-6 Bragar, 7-11 Dun Borranish, 12-24 Mealista

BRAGAR NGR NB 288489 (fig 4)

A track to the burial ground near 'Teampull Eoin' has been re-graded to make easier access. Several sherds were found in the side of the cutting. They are mainly red-buff in colour, and several are blackened on the outside. The largest is a craggan-like rim about 300 mm diameter (no. 1). It is undecorated, though there are the indents of finger-tips on the outside where the rim has been joined to the body. Another upright rim is probably also from a cooking pot, as it has a black exterior (no. 2). The bodysherd with the applied zig-zag decoration is unusual, as the ends of the decoration are joined by a raised circle (no. 3).

DUN BORRANISH NGR NB 049333 (fig 4)

This dun is at the end of a rocky promontory on the N side of Uig sands, and is connected to the mainland by a causeway of large blocks of stone. It is bounded on the E and S sides by the river, and is an island only at spring tides. Although a ruin, the outline of the wall is still discernible. The sherds were found where part of the wall on the W side had recently fallen, but it was not possible to tell if they were part of the wall filling or had been stored in the cavity. The buff coloured rim is part of a heavy bowl (no. 7). Other sherds include two red rims (nos 8 and 9), a lightly incised bodysherd (no. 10), and a black bodysherd, decorated with rough lines incised radially from the rim (no. 11).

MEALISTA NGR NA 991241 and 991245 (fig 4)

Here there are a few small exposed sandy bays facing W. The site is no longer inhabited, but the outlines of several blackhouses can be seen. Potsherds are weathering out of the sand, associated with animal and fish bones, winkles and limpet shells. Also found here was what seems to be a rectangular iron rivet plate (25 mm by 27 mm by 2 mm thick) with fragments of wood still adhering to it, and a heavily rusted nail 65 mm long, of rectangular section.

The sherds are mainly buff colour, with simple upright rims (no. 15). Two rimsherds are decorated with incised zig-zag lines and dots perhaps made by a small bone tool (nos 12 and 13), and another is decorated with closely spaced incised diagonal lines, starting just below the rim (no. 14). A dark buff bodysherd, possibly a base, has a hole 9 mm diameter neatly cut through it (no. 17). Two bodysherds have applied zig-zag decoration, though rather larger than those found at the other sites (nos 18 and 19). Also illustrated is a dark grey base sherd decorated with an incised lattice-work pattern (no. 20). Two other sherds are ridged, the smaller one possibly being a handle (no. 24).

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author is grateful to Dr A S Clarke of the Royal Scottish Museum for identifying the comb as antler. The finds have been deposited in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (*Norse brooch fragment* (no. 72) IL 749; *antler comb* (no. 1) HR 1354; *potsherds from Mangersta* HR 1356-1365).