

A kiln at Machrins, Colonsay, Argyll

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In 1977 a small stone-built structure, situated in the sand-dunes on the W coast of Colonsay about 1 km W of Machrins farm, was excavated, as it was thought that it might be a prehistoric burial-cairn (NGR NR 358935). The setting of stones proved, however, to be part of a kiln consisting of two main elements, namely a chamber, of which only part survived, and a narrow passage or extension forming the flue (fig 1). Neither element was complete and, as the structure had, in addition, been used on two distinct occasions, its precise interpretation is uncertain. The kiln had been built in a hollow in the sand-dunes, its inner wall-face consisting of a dry-stone revetment, only one stone in thickness, standing to a height of 0.7 m. The N wall of the extension stood to a height of 0.75 m in six irregular courses; the S wall was 0.5 m high in five courses.

In their original condition the chamber and flue were associated with a deep stone-lined pit or bowl at the centre of the chamber (pl 36). The flue, which ran from W to E, was 1.7 m long, 0.5 m wide at the W end and 0.3 m wide at the E end, and the fire would have been lit at the W end. A single large upright slab formed the main element of each side of the flue, with a series of small flat slabs lying on their upper surface to form a level seating for lintels at a height of about 0.4 m above the floor. None of the lintels, however, remained. The side-slab on the N had been reddened and cracked by fire, as had the adjacent boulder on this side, but the surface of the large slab on the S had rotted, and thus no trace of fire-reddening survived.

The lowest level of material within the flue (a black greasy sand) may be contemporary with its primary use, and flotation of this layer revealed a number of burnt or calcined bone fragments, carbonised cereals and charcoal. The bones included parts of the right astragalus of a sheep and of the right tibia-shaft of a pig, but most were too small to be identified. The botanical remains have kindly been identified by Mrs Camilla Dickson, Department of Botany, University of Glasgow; the cereals comprised about 100 hulled grains of *Hordeum vulgare* L Emend (barley), measuring between 7 mm and 4 mm in length by 3.5 mm and 2 mm in breadth, the lemma bases absent; about 120 poorly preserved grains of *Hordeum vulgare*; eight grains of *Avena* sp, measuring between 6.1 mm and 3.7 mm in length by 2.2 mm and 1.4 mm in breadth, the small size of the grains suggesting *Avena fatua* L or *Avena strigosa* Schreb. The charcoal proved too small to be identified. The cereal seems to indicate that the original purpose of the structure was the drying of grain. The site does not fall readily into any of the categories of corn-drying kilns recorded on the adjacent islands or indeed elsewhere in Scotland (Mercer 1972; Fenton 1974; 1976, 94-9; see also Close-Brooks this volume, pp 328-45).

At the E end of the flue and at the centre of the chamber there was a pit measuring about 0.8 m in diameter and 0.75 m in depth. Stones had been thrown, or had fallen, into the pit in a rather haphazard way, but there is little doubt that it was originally slab-lined, and measured about 0.8 m across the main axis and 0.6 m in depth. An area of burning was present over the filled pit in a clearly secondary position. The remaining upper layers within the chamber consisted of slabs, stones and sand, suggesting the steady falling away of the side-walls of the chamber and infilling with blown sand.

The flue had remained unroofed for some time before the second period of use of site, as the extension was filled with blown sand to a depth of between 0.1 m and 0.2 m; this layer, and the basal layer of organic material within the flue, had been interrupted by a pit, measuring

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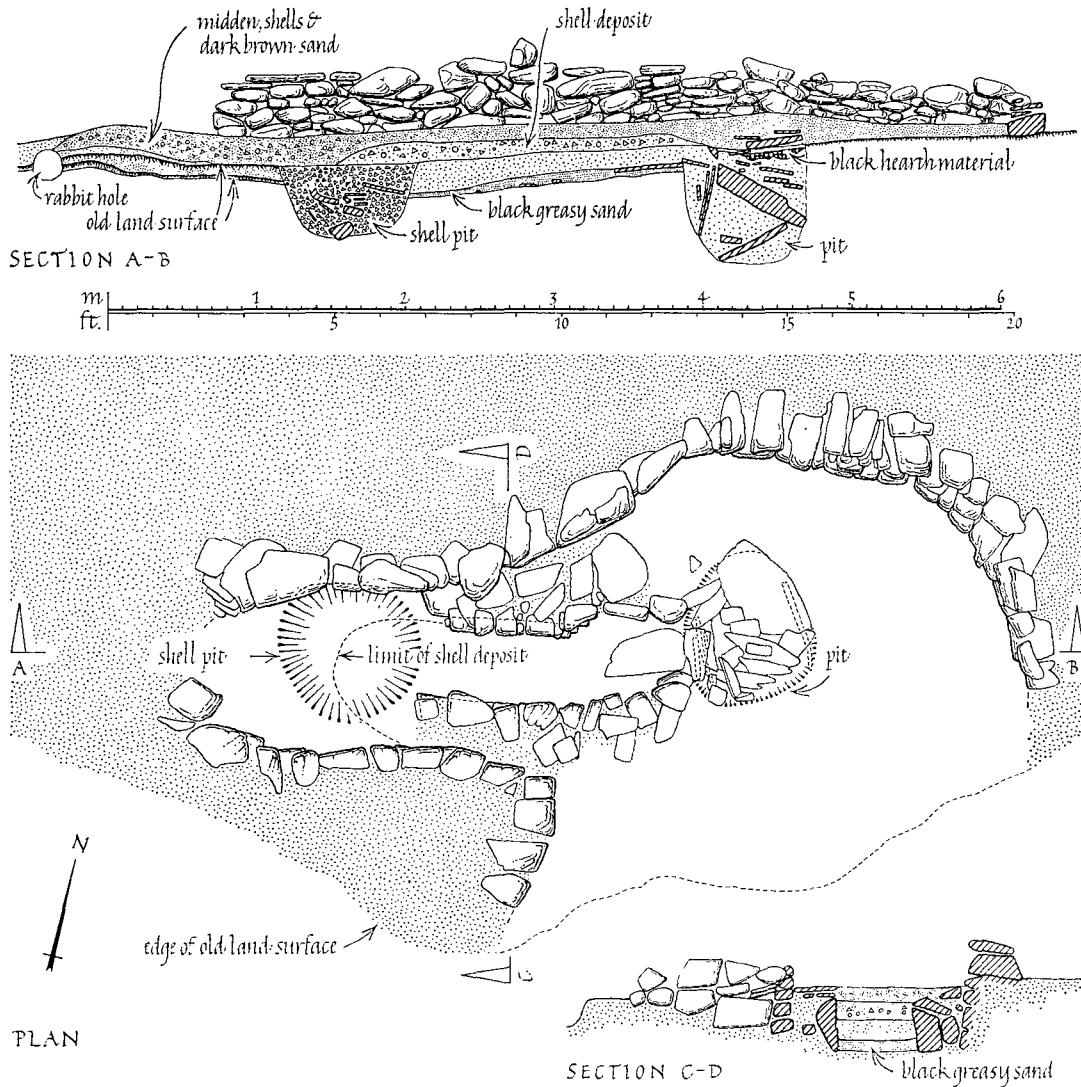


FIG 1 Machrins, Colonsay, Argyll; kiln

about 1 m in diameter and 0.5 m in depth, which was filled with shells. The sides of the pit had been roughly lined with small slabs, some of which had slumped into the interior. The contents of half of the pit were counted: 5,200 limpets, three winkles, a periwinkle and a mussel. Overlying the filling of the pit and the clean blown sand in the flue was a layer of limpets and sand. Finally there was a dark-brown sandy layer covering the interior of the extension with midden material and shells.

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a Machrins, Colonsay, Argyll; kiln, general view



b Machrins, Colonsay, Argyll; kiln, showing flue