

# Excavations on Tòrr an Aba, Iona, Argyll

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## ABSTRACT

*Archaeological excavations in 1956 and 1957 on Tòrr an Aba, a rock outcrop immediately west of Iona Abbey, showed it to be in part built-up, supporting on its summit a sub-rectangular building and a later cross-base. The possible identification of the building with one of the cells of St Columba, as described by his biographer Adomnan, is considered.*

## INTRODUCTION

Two areas on Tòrr an Aba, Iona, were excavated in 1956 (the cross-base) and 1957 (an adjacent structure). This work was part of the investigation of the archaeology of Iona directed by (now Professor) Charles Thomas (then a post-graduate student, Oxford University) under the auspices of the Russell Trust. Several interim notes on and secondary accounts of the Tòrr an Aba excavations have been published but not the record of the original evidence<sup>1</sup>.

The two authors here, respectively post-graduate and under-graduate students at the time, were jointly site supervisors of the excavation in both years and, under Professor Thomas's general supervision, compiled the site record. This has now been made available to us to form the basis of this account, illustrated by: line-drawings prepared from the original field plans and sections and by original photographs<sup>2</sup>. We are therefore able to publish the record of the Tòrr an Aba excavation in its own right rather than as part of the larger project<sup>3</sup>. We do so with the Director's agreement and support. We would express in particular our appreciation of the considerable encouragement, academic stimulation and practical help of David Russell, CBE, MC, DSc, DL, FSA Scot.

## THE SITE (illus 1, 2)

Tòrr an Aba is a natural outcrop of granitic Lewisian gneiss, an outlier of the jagged forward edge of the '50 ft raised beach' to its west and fronted on its east by the gently sloping plateau of the '25 ft raised beach' on which stands Iona Abbey (Barber 1981, 282–7). The Tòrr is a narrow, grass-covered ridge, about 7.5 m in maximum height, lying some 50 m west of the present Abbey.

In 1695 Martin Martin described it as 'Dum Ni Manich, ie Monk's Fort; built of stone and lime, in form of a bastion' (Martin 1934, 288). A cross-base on the summit was last seen in the late 19th century (Dryden MS 7). In 1956 it was decided to rediscover the latter as a first step towards confirming or disproving Martin's statement that Tòrr an Aba was, at least in part, a man-made structure.

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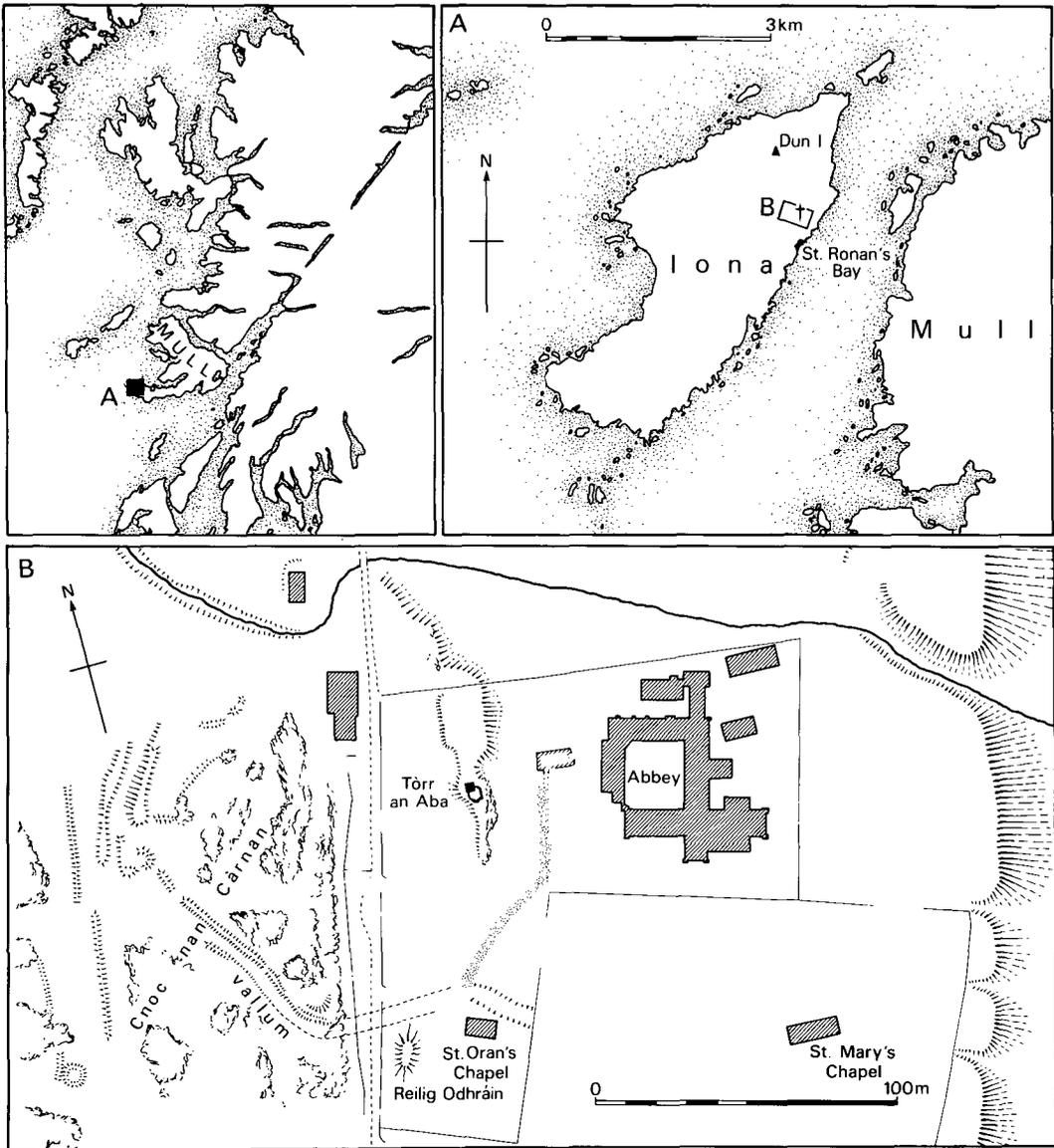
ILLUS 1 Tòrr an Aba from the roof of the Abbey Church to its east. The east face of Cnoc nan Càrnan is in the background (RCAMS; Crown Copyright reserved)

## THE EXCAVATION (illus 3–14)

### THE CROSS-BASE (illus 4–6)

A cutting was made on the middle part of the ridge where, even before the turf was removed, stones were visible in a manner suggesting that they were not part of the natural rock so evident to the north and south. Once the turf was removed, the central portion of the top of the ridge was seen to be artificial: 'the main feature seems to be a large square mortared plinth containing a single slab of micaceous rock, with a socket through it for a cross (-shaft)' (*Excavation Journal*, 10 July, 1956). The plinth was uncovered and cleaned up rather than excavated properly, ie it was not dismembered or removed. The cutting, except on the south where it was extended (below p 188), was only just sufficiently large to expose the outer face of the lowest stones of the structure on north, east and south; on the west, the 'edge' exposed was not convincingly the face. The structure consisted of three levels and indeed appeared to have been built in a tiered profile with three steps.

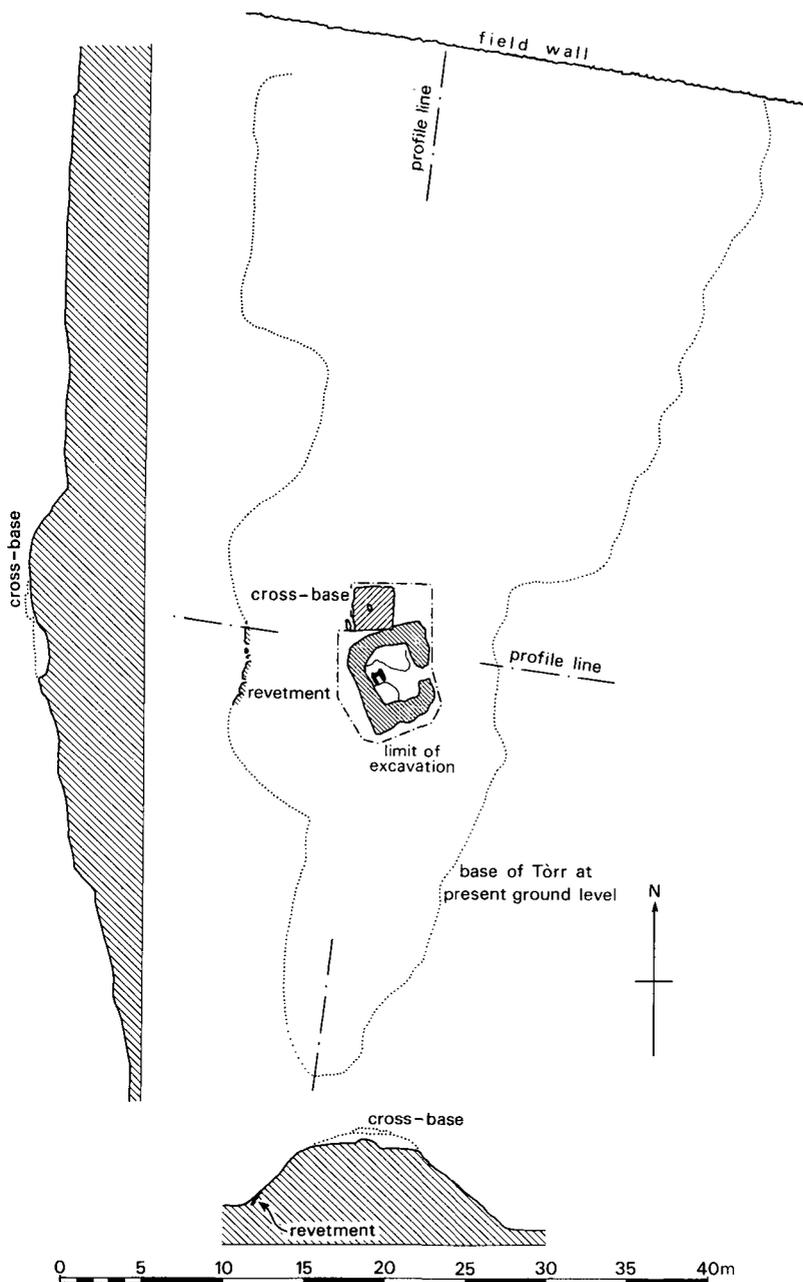
The lowest and widest level was of rubble, soil and decayed mortar. It was faced on three of the four sides with two or three courses of slightly indented stones. These varied between flat schists and granite blocks, each so arranged that a roughly straight edge lay outwards to form approximately straight faces to the base. Set back from these stones was a higher, second kerb of irregular-shaped, mainly granitic stones forming a roughly oval-shaped 'step' aligned north-west/south-east diagonally across the basal structure. This bounded a filling of soil, stones, broken slates and mortar. At neither of these levels were the kerb-stones themselves mortared.



ILLUS 2 Torr an ABA: location map

In the filling of the second level was a large, micaceous slab, horizontally-placed so that its prepared uppermost surface was approximately level with the top of that level's kerb-stones. The stone was roughly D-shaped, c 1×0.75 m in plan, and clearly an artefact; but it was not removed so it is not known if it was unfinished or broken. Its shape indicated that, as finally exposed, it was incomplete.

Approximately in the centre of the longer, north-south axis of the flat top of the stone was a rectangular slot, c 40 cm long and 12 cm wide, right through the thickness of the granite (not

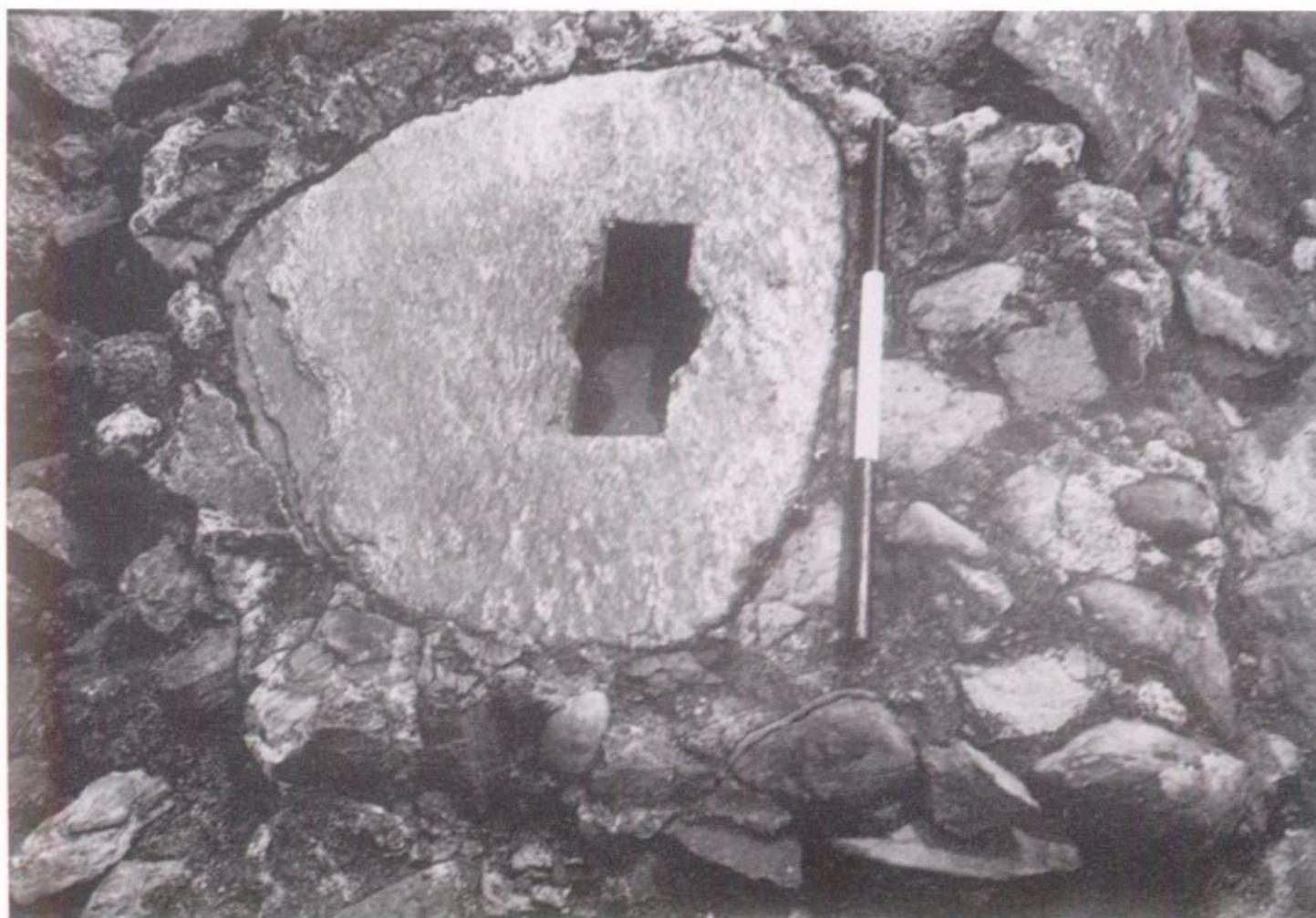


ILLUS 3 Tòrr an Aba with north-south and west-east profiles showing position of the excavated structures on its summit and of the exposed revetment on its west

measured by us though RCAMS 1982, 239, describes the stone as 'flat in section'). Half-way along each of the long (north-south) sides were semi-circular cuts into the granite on east and west. These were thought at the time to be the truncated remains of the central hole through a former (or would-be) mill-stone, later largely cut away by the making of a slot for a cross-shaft when the mill-stone was



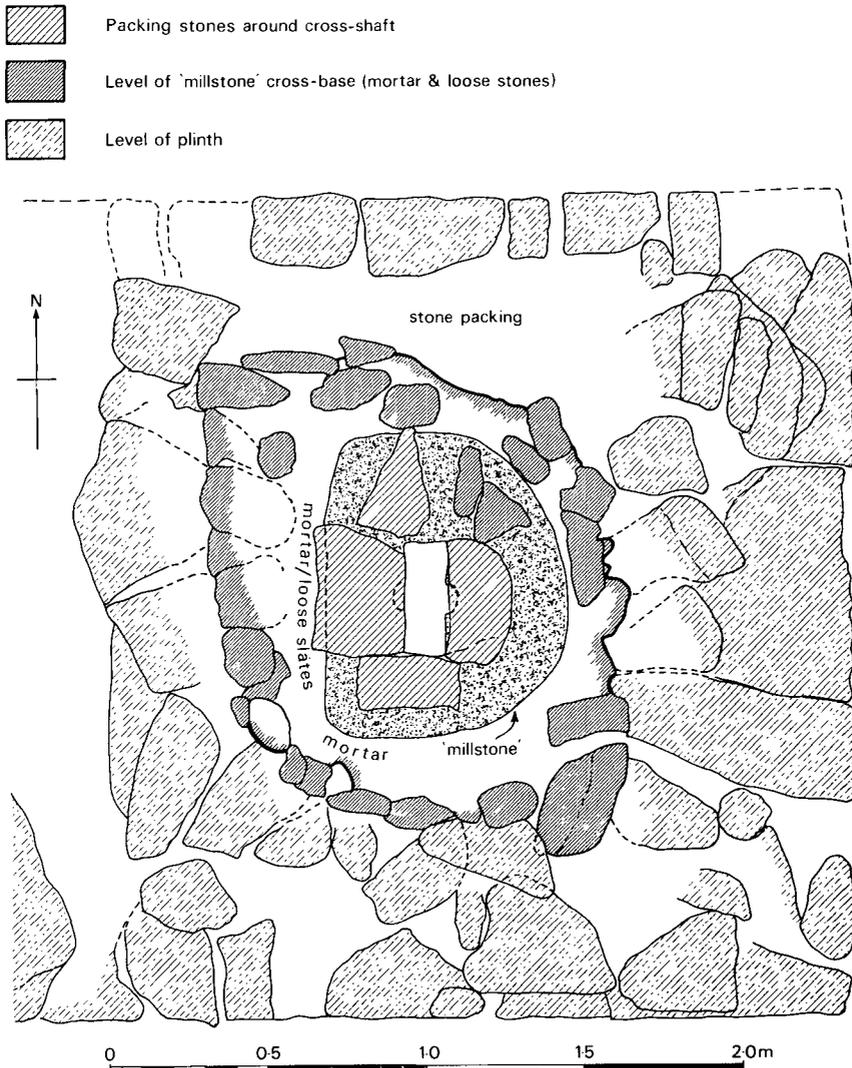
ILLUS 4 Cross-base plinth as exposed immediately under the turf. From the south, 1956



ILLUS 5 Cross-base stone in the top of the second structural layer of the plinth after removal of the packing stones on its surface. From the north, 1956

put to a secondary use. A similar 'mill-stone slot cross-base' was found built into the structure of a drain beneath the cloisters of the Abbey in 1956 and mill-stones were reused in Abbey buildings elsewhere (RCAMS 1982, 135; cf also Barber 1981, p1 19a). However, as exposed, the Tòrr an Aba example was not certainly a mill-stone (illus 5) and the possibility that it was primarily a cross-shaft basal stone with slot and flanges for wedges to provide stability should be allowed.

The semi-circular flanges to the slot were overlaid by two of the three large straight-edged stones which rested on the surface of the large, perforated stone, precisely carrying the west, south and east edges of the slot up to a higher level. This third and highest level of the structure as a whole was confined to the area of the perforated stone and consisted of rubble packed around the outside of the larger stones facing inwards to the slot. There can be little doubt that this level of the structure was



ILLUS 6 Plan of cross-base plinth

intended to help stabilize an upright feature, presumably a cross-shaft, standing in the slot through the D-shaped stone. As such, it was presumably packed on to the existing two levels of plinth after the shaft had been stood upright and the three large stones found *in situ* had been placed against its west, south and east sides. A fourth largish stone lay at an angle at the north-west corner of the slot. Probably it had been placed against the shaft's north face originally; its position as found suggested that the shaft may have been carefully removed by being pulled out and lowered to the north, leaving a precise symmetry around its former position except for some disturbance at the point of its extraction.

This whole structure can convincingly be identified as a cross-base and indeed the one recorded as visible in the late 19th century (above p 181). It cannot, however, be closely dated. The mortar and slates in the filling of the plinth's lowest and second levels indicate a medieval or later date; indeed they show that material from elsewhere was incorporated in the structure (was the mortar by any chance from close by and related to the 'lime' observed by Martin in 1695?). RCAMS similarly opts for a 'medieval' (1982, 4) and 'late medieval' (*ibid*, 240) date of construction of the cross-base; it was certainly later than the building to its south (below p 188). On the other hand, the three-tiered plinth uncovered may well be but the last of a sequence of structures on the site, and dating it between, say, AD 1300–1700 says nothing about possible earlier functions there including use for a cross-shaft. It would seem desirable at some stage to excavate the plinth properly, remove it, and investigate the area beneath and around it.

#### THE TÒRR SIDES (illus 3, 7, 8)

Both the west and east sides of Tòrr an ABA were scrutinised carefully though superficially except for one small cutting on the west. Close examination in 1957 proved that the western side of Tòrr an ABA was indeed built-up. The removal of paving slabs which had lain against the base of the



ILLUS 7 Basal revetment of Tòrr an ABA on the west as excavated. From the south-west, 1957



ILLUS 8 Stonework exposed but unexcavated at the lower south-west end of Tòrr an Aba. The flat summit of the Tòrr forms the skyline to the north, with the site of the building just beyond it. From the south-west, 1957

ridge exposed stone poking through the turf. One cutting up against the base of the ridge (illus 3, west-east profile) revealed two courses of carefully laid, massive granitic boulders (illus 7). Elsewhere along the western side were fallen boulders and tumble, though nowhere was any of Martin's 'lime' observed. Nevertheless, all the evidence pointed to a deliberate effort to enlarge the summit of the ridge by building up from its basal junction with ground level on the west. Close examination of the Tòrr's eastern side, however, revealed nothing but the natural rock and some loose stones.

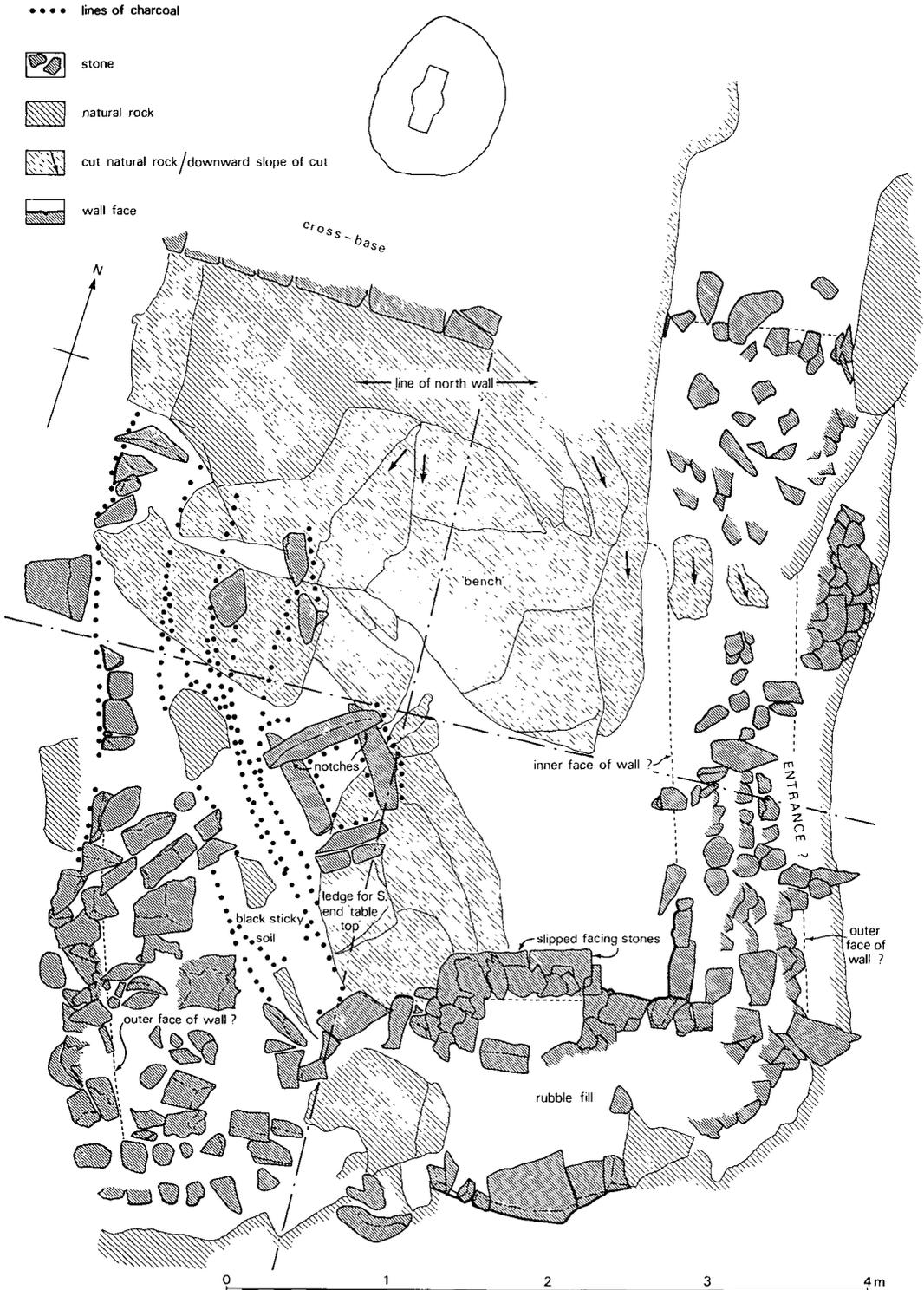
#### THE BUILDING (illus 9–16)

In 1956 it had been noted that the southern and south-eastern edge of the plinth of the cross-base overlay further masonry. It was therefore decided in 1957 to excavate a larger area across the slightly lower and more or less flat central part of the ridge-top immediately south of the plinth. Following archaeological practice of the time, the area was investigated in quadrants with staggered north-south and east-west baulks (illus 13).

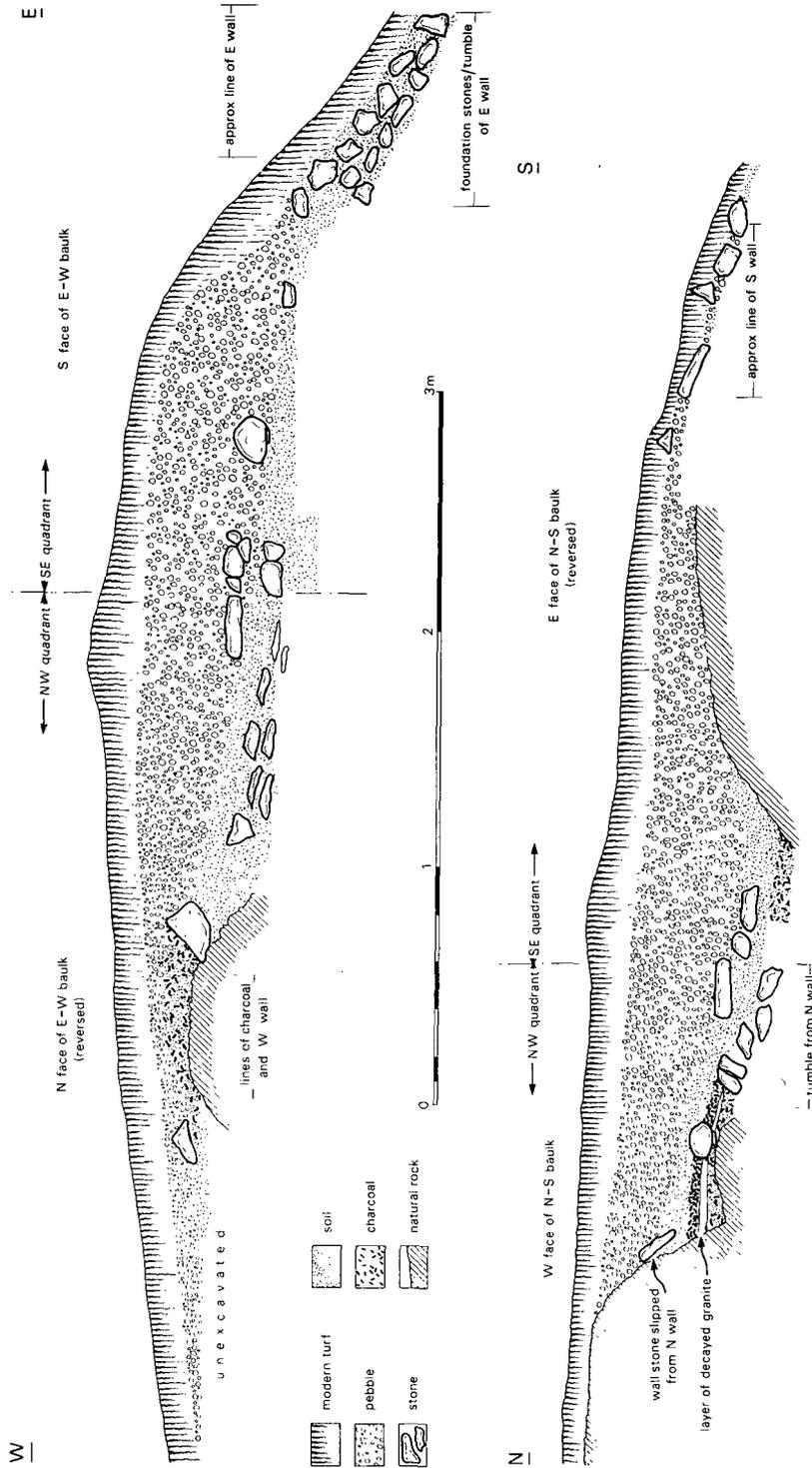
The turf was stripped from all four quadrants and in places, especially on the west side, it and the topsoil proved to be c 20 cm thick. Towards the end of the excavation, the baulks were removed and the whole area of the excavation, after selective removal of stones, was cleaned up and recorded. The excavated area was not, however, emptied in the modern fashion: essentially what is shown on illus 9 should still be there (see below p 196).

#### THE WALLS (illus 9–11)

Stones protruded into the topsoil in places, and lay immediately beneath it, towards the outer edges of the quadrants on all sides except the north. Excavation showed these to be the remains of a



ILLUS 9 Plan of building in the top of Tòrr an ABA as finally excavated, showing its relationship to the cross-base and the lines of the north-south and west-east section on illustration 10



ILLUS 10 West-east and north-south sections across the building in the top of Tòrr an Aba (see illus 9 for their lines)

much-ruined wall or wall-footing of a sub-rectangular structure. The wall had fallen both outwards and inwards and in only a few places were facing stones still *in situ*. They, and the rubble core which constituted most of the feature as excavated, ran between and incorporated outcrops of living rock.

The wall was best preserved on the south-east (illus 11). There the internal south-eastern corner was intact and rectangular, with three facing stones aligned to the north and, to the west, a block of second and third courses of stones survived intact but tipped inwards over the line of the basal facing stones. Nowhere else was the inner face convincingly apparent, though individual stones were probably on its line. Lines of stones indicating an outer face or, more strictly, an outward-facing course still *in situ*, occurred on the north-east at basal level and around the south-east corner. Here the structure appeared to be curved and, as down much of the east side, on top of made-up rubble of which we were looking at only the top. Similarly, the two or three roughly stepped courses forming the south-west corner were built on top of made-up rubble, presumably the top of the platform revetted by the large boulders at the west base of the Tòrr. The outer 'face' of the west wall had shifted outwards and it was only at its north end that four stones side by side suggested the original line of the basal course. The large stone in front of the gap on their north, between there and an outcrop, had probably originally filled that gap. Four stones further to the north again filled a crevice in the natural rock.

No north wall existed on the flat top of the rock between those four stones and the north-east corner; but one had formerly existed. Firstly, the rubble of the north-east corner, broken by a north-south ridge of rock between it and the south-east corner of the cross-base, continued west and was apparent under the cross-base corner.



ILLUS 11 South-eastern corner of the building in the top of Tòrr an ABA from the north-west at the centre of the quadrants initially used for excavation. The inner face of the wall in front of the ranging pole has moved inwards. The steep east slope of the Tòrr is on the left

Secondly, as described below, stones from the flat rock had collapsed into the interior of the building in sufficient quantity to allow a north wall to be inferred (illus 10, north-south profile). In view of the level of the rock on which such a north wall would have lain, relative to the rest of the building, such a 'wall' need have consisted of no more than one or two courses. Indeed, nowhere was there firm evidence that the wall was higher than three courses.

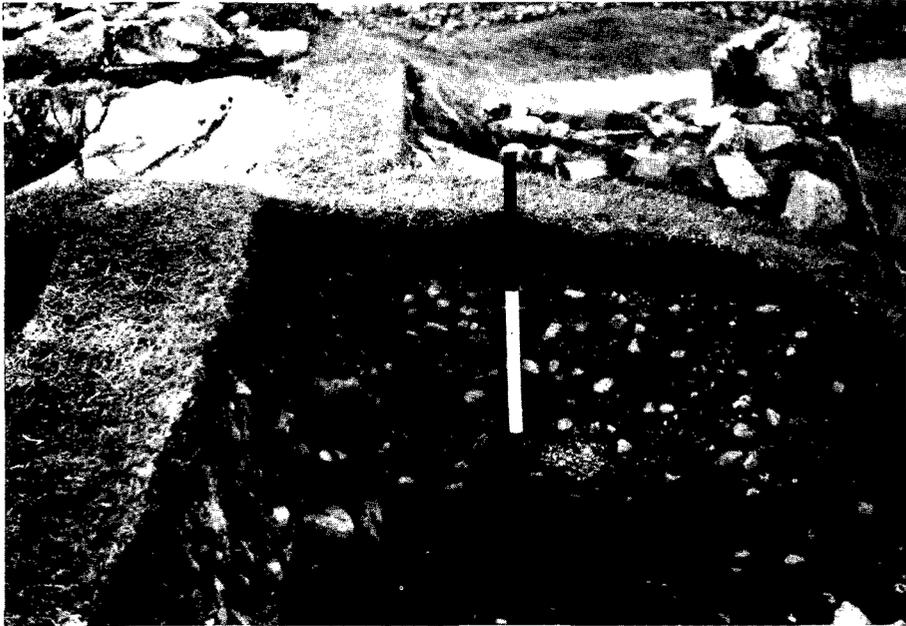
There was, however, suggestive evidence that the wall structure, at least on the west and north-east, may have consisted of two other elements. In curving lines down the west side, and much less suggestively on the north-east, were stubs of charcoal on the top of the wall filling. These were c 1 cm in diameter and characteristically 2-4 cm long. On the west they occurred in blacky sticky soil, a thin layer of which also occurred over weathered granitic grits on the rock-cut 'bench' below the line of the inferred north wall (below p 195). Unfortunately, none of this charcoal was kept for identification and further study. On the north-east, the charcoal stubs were more scattered in a charcoal-flecked soil; signs of burning existed on the rock exposed to their immediate west.

#### THE INTERIOR (illus 10, 12-14)

Immediately beneath the turf in the central area where the quadrants joined was a fill of humus and beach pebbles of a fairly uniform size, ie they had been selected (illus 12, 13). This fill increased in thickness west to east from c 15 cm to c 45 cm but its central upper surface was virtually horizontal. The pebbles filled a hollow cut down into the living rock, the surface of which lay only c 8-9 cm below the existing grass at the north edge of the north-east quadrant close to the south edge of the cross-plinth. To the south, a few pebbles lay between the upper stones bounding the edge of the hollow,



ILLUS 12 The pebble fill of the building in plan and section during excavations of the south-west quadrant, viewed from the south. The inner line of the west wall is appearing on the left; the skewers mark the positions of 'charcoal stubs'. The rectangular arrangement of notched stones lay under the pebbles in the corner of the cutting



ILLUS 13 The pebble fill in the section of the north face of the south-east quadrant, viewed from the south; the corner of the quadrant, top right in illus 12, is centre left here. The steep edge of the fill, and the slope of the Tòrr itself, is visible right. Beyond, in the north-west quadrant, is part of the rock-cut 'bench' and, beyond, the east end of the south face of the cross-base plinth re-exposed in 1957

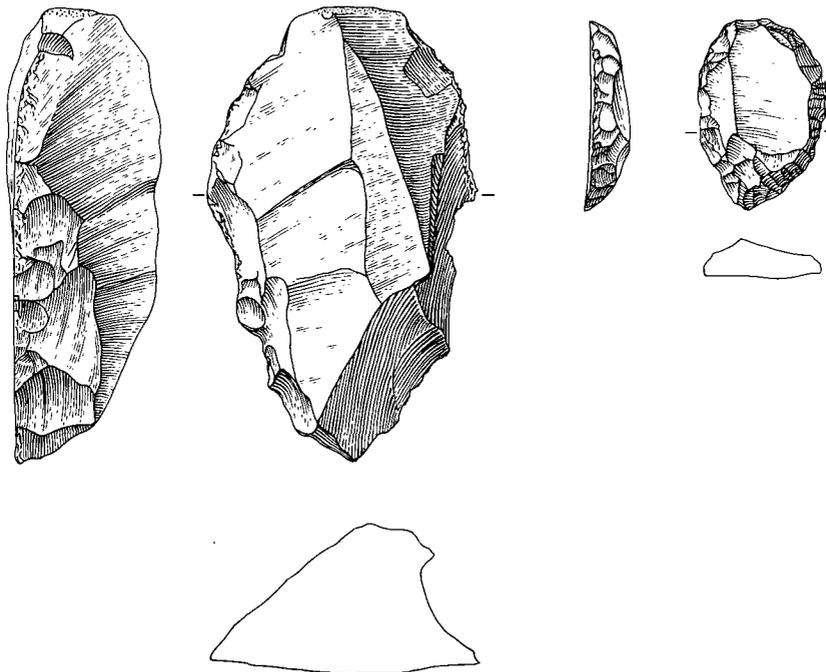
while to the west pebbles continued thinly outside the hollow and to the edge of the cutting. On the east, however, the pebbles stopped abruptly at the top of a mass of stones and did not spill down the steep drop despite there being nothing (except, now, turf) to hold them in position. The whole of this pebble filling was removed: it was homogeneous, contained no artefacts, and showed no tip-lines or other features.

The pebbles lay directly on a layer of dark brown soil (illus 10, 13). The sharply-defined surface of this layer sloped from west to east, c 35 cm in c 3 m, and from north to south, c 35 cm in c 2 m. The layer itself was mostly c 15–20 cm thick and contained no visible intrusions such as artefacts, shells or small stones. On and in it, however, were some large blocks of displaced bedrock exemplified by the stones shown in section on illus 10. The layer was not totally removed but sufficient was excavated to show that beneath it lay, in the contracting centre of the hollow as the bedrock sloped inwards, a very dark, almost black, soil with flecks of charcoal. Similar material lay directly on a ledge of natural rock on the north edge of the hollow (below p 195) and contained stones which appeared to have originated from the north.

The 'ledge of natural rock' was one of the two 'fittings' inside the structure. It was entirely of rock *in situ*, but its shape as found was man-made, deliberately produced by removing bedrock. The result, presumably intentional, was a smooth-surfaced ledge roughly trapezoidal in plan c 1.5 m long at its front (west) and c 1.20 m long at its slightly lower rear edge. From there a sloping back rose 53 cm to a levelled surface immediately beneath a thin topsoil and on which stood the lowest course of the cross-plinth. These two regular surfaces appeared to have been produced by splitting off the



ILLUS 14 The three granite stones *in situ*, interpreted as the substructure for a seat or table in conjunction with the stones and living rock in the foreground. From south-east



ILLUS 15 Two flint scrapers (scale 1:1) from the building on Tòrr an Aba

bedrock along its planes. On the west, the end of the ledge was marked by a rising rock surface, very rough and irregular where bedrock had been knocked off against its grain; while on the east a north-south mini-ridge of bedrock, c 30 cm wide, trimmed on its west and falling naturally and vertically on its east, rose to the north from below the lowest point excavated at its south end. The whole looked like a bench-seat or high-backed couch with closed ends.

On the ledge itself, resting in the angle between its surface and the rear rock, was an informative stratigraphy more detailed than that of the hollow generally (illus 10, north-south profile). The ledge was sealed by the pebble-filling and the underlying dark-brown soil, with a single stone resting point downwards in the latter and held in position against the rear of the bench by the former. Beneath were three thin layers: black, burnt material with much charcoal, decayed granite, and very dark soil with flecks of charcoal. Resting on the last was a stone on the forward edge of the bench, with a tumble of stones in the same layer south and below it.

On the south-west side of the exposed structure was the second of the 'internal fittings', a three-sided rectangular feature of split and dressed granitic slabs (illus 9, 14, 16). The south ends of its east and west stones rested on bedrock, dipping north with its east side jammed between rock irregularities immediately above the layer of dark brown soil (illus 9, 14). The west and east lower stones each had notches cut in the upper surfaces of their north tips and the under-surface of the higher north stone had been shaped so as to fit on top of them. On the south side, an outcrop of the natural rock had also been deliberately levelled; on the ledge so formed were three flatter stones. Charcoal 'stubs' occurred around the inside of the 'box' and along its outer east face (below p 196).

The only two finds from the whole of the excavation came from the south-east quadrant: a large flint scraper outside the wall and a smaller pointed scraper in the pebble infill (illus 15).



ILLUS 16 The building in the top of Tòrr an ABA, after excavation and as consolidated, 1957. The rectangular stone setting, right centre, and the rock-cut 'bench', foreground from above, were left exposed. From the south edge of the cross-base plinth, looking south

On 27 August, 1957, the cross-base and the horizontal 'three-sided rectangular feature' were pointed up *in situ*. The interior of the building was grassed with specially cut turf and, later, stones marking the outlines of its walls were mortared into position. The site remains visible in this state (illus 16).

## INTERPRETATION

The interpretation of the excavated evidence made at the time when all the observations were fresh in our minds was as follows (based on the Excavation Journal). The small but prominent ridge west of the Abbey was deliberately revetted on its west face in order to provide an enlarged summit area on which to build a structure. It is possible that the east face was also revetted in a similar fashion and/or was marked by some other structure (below p 198). A small sub-rectangular building was then constructed on and partly in the widened summit, using local stone for wall foundations between existing rock outcrops. These were prepared in places to provide suitably level foundations for the stone footings. Turf was piled on top of these foundations and thin stakes were embedded in it to make minimally, a windbreak on the west or, more probably, either a low wickerwork or wattle wall or a 'wig-wam' type of roof. If the last, it could only have been covered lightly with rushes, heather or straw but the whole structure might well have been timber-framed with members of which no trace was found.

Inside the hut, the natural rock was prepared on the north side to form a bench, seat or couch. Opposite this, three dressed rocks were positioned using a wood-working technique to form three sides of a rectangle, with a ledge being prepared in the natural rock to form the fourth side. Together, these were the substructure for a flat top, of wood or stone, to serve as a seat or table. When a modern drawing-board was placed on top of the three rocks, with one of its edges resting on the south ledge, supported by the three smaller stones, the board lay perfectly horizontal.

Any one seated on the rock bench facing the 'desk-top' across the interior could look out east across the Sound of Mull – assuming there was an entrance on the east side of the building. The east 'wall' as excavated, however, was the most ruinous (illus 9; 11, left; 13, right). One stone lay firmly embedded at right angles to the probable line of the wall and might have marked one side of an entrance, but in fact there was no conclusive evidence one way or the other for an entrance on this side. On the other hand the foundations were continuous on the south and west sides of the building, and on the north the rock-cut ledge was too deep to be a step, so there definitely was no entrance at or below contemporary ground level there.

The following paragraphs incorporate very much post-excavation thoughts, largely arising from the critical re-examination of the record for this publication in the light, now, of 30 years' experience. At some stage the hut ceased to be used. Possibly, even probably, it burnt, for it is difficult to account otherwise for the *in situ* charcoal stubs on and along the west wall. Burnt material and scorch marks on the rock also occurred on the north-east of the structure. Furthermore, the key stratification on the rock-cut bench on the north suggested burning, a period of exposure to the elements in which the 'thin layer of decayed granite' accumulated, and a further period in which exposed and disintegrating burnt material was washed down. This last, rather than *in situ* burning, probably explains the charcoal in and around the rectangular stone feature. A subsequent longer period of abandonment and decay is then indicated by the 'dark brown soil' containing former wall-stones sporadically across the interior. This is interpreted as a combination of natural collapse, deposition and, possibly, vegetational colonization.

Only then, apparently, were the remains given systematic attention. Work seems to have been carried out with the intention of, literally, levelling the site. The wall remnants, on the north, west and

south, were pushed inwards on to what had already accumulated. The left-handed sides of the sections (illus 10) and the tipped length of wall on the south (illus 9) clearly show the main evidence on which this interpretation is based. We further infer that, as part of the same action, the remaining depression was filled in with selected pebbles and that the whole site was then deliberately levelled off to form a horizontal-topped platform (illus 10). In other words, not only was the structure finally demolished and filled in but a 'monument' was created to mark its former existence. Given the instability of the core of this platform, its east edge must have been retained by some structure at least as high as the top of the pebble fill (illus 10, west–east section). The pebble surface of the platform probably remained exposed for some time; we wonder whether anything stood on it.

Subsequently in structural terms a stone-plinth to hold a cross-base was built immediately north of, and partly overlapping, the levelled site. Perhaps this construction, or an earlier version of what we uncovered, was the *finale* of the levelling operation; or there may well have been a considerable gap in the time between the two events. We suspect that evidence on this point lies in and under the plinth; but what is certain is that any remains of the north wall of the building above the level of the natural rock were removed to accommodate the south edge of the plinth we exposed.

It may of course have been coincidence that led to a cross being erected beside the site of an (unknown?) earlier building: Tòrr an ABA is an obvious site for a cross after all. But while such could easily be the explanation, an alternative interpretation could be that the cross commemorates the 'specialness' of the building by perpetuating the commemorative function of the pebble platform.

In sum the sequence of *structural* events would seem to be (with uncertainties in brackets):

	<i>Illus</i>
revetting, and widening of the top of, the Tòrr	3, 7, 8
construction of sub-rectangular building with fittings	4, 11, 14, 15
use of building	
(burning of building)	
abandonment of building	10
razing and levelling of site of building	9–11
site of building marked by pebble platform	10–13
(events immediately north of the platform – a cross or crosses?)	
construction of medieval cross-base plinth	4, 6
cross standing on plinth	5
cross removed (mid 16th-century?)	5
plinth disused but still visible late 19th century	
plinth becomes largely grassed over c 1900–56	3
archaeological excavation of structures 1956–7	
consolidation of structures for display 1957	16
new functions as visitor attraction and source of academic controversy 1957–present	16

## DISCUSSION

### DATING

The only material dating evidence from the building itself was the two flints, both in a secondary context. Both might have arrived in the hut with the filling of beach pebbles but, now that subsequent excavation has shown prehistoric worked flint to be scattered over the area (Barber 1981, 352–5), their presence is culturally insignificant and, with regard to the structure, chronologically irrelevant (except in providing a remote *terminus post quem*).

The structural sequence on the Tòrr suggests fairly strongly that the building is pre-medieval. The form of the structure and its suggested reconstructed appearance are consistent with a pre-medieval date. The method of construction, particularly in relating to natural rock, is similar to that employed on a hut on Dun Cul Bhuirg (RCAMS 1982, 30–31; Ritchie & Lane 1980) which is dated from its associated material to the Scottish Iron Age, first century BC/third AD. The hut on Tòrr an Aba, however, has no hearth and is small in comparison, a fact to be borne in mind when considering its purpose (below p 199). Strictly speaking the structure is no more closely dated than between late prehistoric/earlier than late-medieval, though it is unlikely to be medieval. Its context, close to and arguably within an early Christian monastic centre, may not be insignificant, though such a spatial relationship could of course be coincidental.

Excavation carried out north-east and south of Tòrr an Aba by Reece (Institute of Archaeology, London University) between 1964 and 1974, and to the south by Barber (SDD Central Excavation Unit) in 1979, produced numerous uncalibrated radiocarbon estimates spanning ad 300–1000 (summarized in Barber 1981, 367). These have been interpreted as showing that the earliest monastic, ie Columban, occupation was in the Reilig Oran area and that material near the modern Abbey and Tòrr an Aba belonged to a later expansion of the monastery. Even if this argument is sustainable on the basis of such radiocarbon estimates<sup>4</sup>, which we doubt, there seems no good reason to deem the Tòrr as lying outside the Columban settlement. It is well within the vallum (RCAMS 1982, 6, map of village and Abbey) which, following Thomas (1971, 29–39), is much more likely to belong to the earliest period of the monastic settlement than to a later one<sup>7</sup>. We appreciate, however, that an intra-vallum location does not of itself date the building.

#### ACCESS

The question of access to the hut is difficult to judge but crucial to interpretation. The excavation showed traces of foundations on the north overlain by the cross-base, strong foundations on the west through to the south, and rock tumble on the north-east, east and south-east sides (illus 9). Approach to the summit of the Tòrr today is usually a scramble up and along the southern spine but when the hut was standing the south wall would have blocked any access to a presumed entrance on the east. Was there originally a ramp or built stairway up the eastern side?

The statement of Martin Martin (above p 181) is fundamental: what did he actually see? The east face of Tòrr an Aba is now quite precipitous, a drop of some 5 m (illus 1, 11, 13). Despite rigorous examination, no traces of a revetment as on its west side were visible on the east; nothing capable of supporting steps or a ramp can be seen. If, however, Martin, who was looking at the Tòrr from the east<sup>5</sup>, saw a ruinous structure abutting the rocky slope of the Tòrr, perhaps he used the only architectural term which from his experience of castellated sites fitted what he saw.

No other references to building or structures on or against the Tòrr occur but evidence from records pertaining to the Duke of Argyll's estates tell of stone-robbing in and around the Abbey precincts (Cregeen 1964)<sup>6</sup>. In 1757, for example, a wall was built around the Abbey ruins in order to preserve them; it was rebuilt in 1791. Possibly then, loose stone close at hand, as from a collapsed structure against Tòrr an Aba, was utilized to build the western stretch of this wall (RCAMS 1982, 54; Pls A, B. The Tòrr shows just above the bulk of Cnoc nan Carnan on the middle left hand edge of Pl B with the Duke of Argyll's wall immediately adjacent). Since excavation has proved the presence of a building on the summit of Tòrr an Aba, then there has to have been a way up for it to have been used. Although negative evidence is not proof, the existence of some structure externally has to be postulated in order to make sense of the building and of what Martin saw. We would add that, subjectively, our impression in excavating the east side of the building was that we were looking at the top of a collapsed structure.

## FUNCTION

The nub of the problem is the function of the undated hut on Tòrr an Aba. The name of the ridge itself, the hill of the Abbot, is traditional and suggestive, but how old is it? Was the Tòrr indeed part of the Columban monastic settlement? And if so, was the hut conceivably that of the first Abbot, Columba himself? RCAMS (1982, 40) and Barber (1981) discount this suggestion. The hut cannot be identified, they state, as one of the cells which, according to Adomnan, Columba's biographer, Columba used during his lifetime. Nevertheless, the possibility is worth serious consideration for two main reasons: the building as excavated is unique and in the right place; and it has no competitors.

Writing about a hundred years after Columba's death, just conceivably when an oral tradition might have survived<sup>8</sup>, Adomnan used two words to describe the Saint's lodgings: '*tegoriolum*' or '*teggorium*', and '*hospitium*' or '*hospitiolum*'. The former '*in eminentiore loco erat fabricatum*' ('was constructed on higher ground' or 'in a higher place') (Adomnan 123a) and was used by Columba for writing, whereas the latter was used for sleeping and was furnished with a stone bed. The '*tegoriolum*' was '*tabulis subfulto*', translatable as 'supported on planks' or 'wooden joists' (Adomnan 29a).

Adomnan also says, more than once, that while in the '*tegoriolum*' Columba could hear shouts from the shore of Mull and could see the rocks there. The implication is that the entrance to the hut faced east. The hut built on Tòrr an Aba with an entrance facing east fills the descriptions given by Adomnan: as persons who spent many hours working on the Tòrr, we can attest to its fitting Adomnan's oral and visual criteria. Adomnan, however, was sure that the '*tegoriolum*' was supported in some way by a wooden feature. Perhaps the sub-structure of wooden steps up to a platform in front of it made it look as if it were held up on posts?

The other complication is that, in Adomnan, the writing-hut did not contain the sleeping place whereas the excavated hut on Tòrr an Aba contained a broad seat or couch fashioned out of the living rock. This, however, could just as well be a bench-seat as a couch-bed, tempting though it is to think of it as where Columbus slept. Possibly Adomnan did not mention the 'stone bed', if such it was, in the '*tegoriolum*' because he had been told only that Columba wrote or taught there.

Alternatively Columba might have sat on a wooden bench supported on the curious box-like construction and the natural rock, facing east and overlooking the monastic grounds below and across the raised beach towards Mull. Any visitors or students, and they occur frequently in Adomnan's account, could have sat on the stone couch opposite the Saint. Indeed, if this interpretation is correct, it could explain the unfortunate incident with the ink-horn (Adomnan 29a). The Saint had warned his attendant, Diormit, that the newly-filled ink-horn (?balanced on a writing desk, as some manuscript illustrations show) would be spilt by a visitor. Diormit stood before the door to prevent an interruption but was called away. A visitor arrived, advanced to kiss the Saint, and upset the ink-horn. It is easy to understand how this could have happened in the confined space of the little hut on Tòrr an Aba.

In at least two instances Adomnan mentions the erection of crosses to commemorate particular events or places. He explains (46b) the existence of two crosses along the road from the harbour: they marked where Columba stood when his aged uncle was taken ill and the place where his uncle died. In the chapter which describes Columba's last day (127b), Adomnan tells of the Saint visiting a barn which contained grain stored for the winter and, on the way back to the monastery, sitting down by the road-side: '*In quo loco postea crux molari infixi lapidi hodieque stans in margine cernitur viae*' ('in that place a cross that was later fixed in a mill-stone is seen standing by the road side, even today'). If a cross were erected where he sat once, the notion that a free-standing cross could have been erected (and later fixed in a mill-stone?) alongside St Columba's writing-cell seems not entirely fanciful. That the building had already been abandoned, ceremonially filled with beach pebbles and converted into

a 'monument' (or 'killed' in anthropological terms) might be considered to give credence to this suggestion.

If Adomnan's statement that Columba's writing-cell was on higher ground is believed, and if we accept that the site of the Columban monastery is likely to have been somewhere near the Benedictine and present Community buildings, then undoubtedly Tòrr an Aba is a good candidate for the site of that cell. The only other two like places are the small knoll within the graveyard Reilig Oran (illus 2) or the rocky ridge Cnoc nan Càrnan (illus 1). Neither have produced any relevant evidence.

## CONCLUSION

Though our main concern here is to publish the excavation record, we feel it a duty to offer an interpretation of the curious evidence produced. In a way, the potentially-relevant documentary context is inhibiting for, without it, as archaeologists we could legitimately be writing of a 'ceramic-free ritual complex' or a 'symbolic node within a ceremonial centre'. Thank goodness we do not have to; we believe, but cannot prove, that we excavated a structure where St Columba probably wrote and others honoured this fact.

'Archaeology is not, by its nature, capable of linking such remains of an approximately-dated site to any one individual, let alone a named individual; but the excavators of 1957 felt, and still feel, that the details as revealed by digging . . . are consistent with the description given by Adomnan of a (if not the only) cell, perhaps the living or writing-cell of Columba in the sixth century. The physical situation accords with specific references; the position is suggestive, as is the later treatment (erection of a cross); and frankly no better suggestion has yet emerged for any other excavated part of the central Iona complex'. Given the existence of the excavated remains, some explanation has to be made; Professor Charles Thomas's words provide, in more measured academic terms than our belief, a reasonable one.

## NOTES

- 1 *The Coracle (J Iona Community)*, 31, November 1957 (with photograph of the site on the cover); *ibid*, 35, November 1959; *Discovery Excav Scot* 1957, 10–11; 1958, 14–15; 1959, 10–11; *The Rothmill Quarterly* (house journal of Tullis Russell and Company Limited), 29, Spring 1957; J V S Megaw, *J Religious Hist*, 3, No 3, June 1965, 227 (Sydney University Press); RCAMS 1982, 40; 1983, 15.  
Two major excavation programmes adjacent to Tòrr an Aba have been carried out and published since our small-scale work (Reece 1981; Barber 1981). Our intention being primarily to publish our excavation record, we do not attempt any synthesis here of the now considerable Iona data-base.
- 2 The line illustrations have been prepared by Stephen Crummy (Prehistoric and Romano-British Department, British Museum). The original excavation photographs were taken by Malcolm Murray, J V S Megaw and EF (then all Department of Archaeology, University of Edinburgh). Illustration 1 is by RCAMS. We would additionally thank the Commission, and especially its Secretary and Photographic Section, for the careful preparation from 30 year-old negatives of all the other photographic prints used here. The excavation archive is now in the Commission's National Monuments Record, Scotland.
- 3 This account completes the discharge of the Iona liabilities innocently incurred by one of us (PJF) as an undergraduate. He would like to thank Graham Ritchie in particular for his helpfulness in preparing for publication, with full consultation, the report on the former's excavation at Dun Cul Bhuirg (Ritchie & Lane 1980). The allegedly lost finds from there, which were actually in the Department of Archaeology, Edinburgh University, where they had been left by the excavator, were subsequently published without PJF's knowledge or consent and without any consultation with him (Topping 1985). They are now in the Royal Museum of Scotland.

- 4 Given the uncertainties in the use of radiocarbon calibration curves for close dating in the mid first millennium AD, currently C<sup>14</sup> estimates of c AD 500 can be interpreted as being c AD 600. At least half the available C<sup>14</sup> dates from Iona could embrace the Columban period.
- 5 It is possible that Martin's 'Dun ni Manich' was Cnoc nan Càrnan or Dun I. Neither in our view fits the specifications: the former shows no traces whatsoever of artificiality, nor does the latter which is in any case c ½ km north-west of the Abbey.
- 6 David Russell drew our attention to this reference.
- 7 Barber (1981, fig 46, b) mis-interpreted and misrepresented Thomas's plan of the vallum. The thick black line shown by Barber through the middle of Thomas's early monastic area is the modern road from the village to the north of the island and has nothing to do with the course of the vallum. The north-east corner and northern half of the east side of the vallum enclosure are clearly shown as an earthwork on Thomas's plan yet unaccountably omitted on Barber's inaccurate representation of Thomas's work. Further, in discussing Thomas's plan, Barber (p 361 and, incidentally, p 355) makes no reference to the omitted earthwork evidence and provides two guesses to explain Thomas's suggestion that the line of the vallum passed *beneath* the present Abbey. In fact, that line was proposed in the light of the then-available excavated evidence and the earthwork remains to the north which Barber ignores.
- 8 On the nature and use of literary sources in post-Roman western Britain generally, *see* Thomas 1971, ch 7. The suggestion that the building on Tòrr an ABA could be Columba's cell is doubted by RCAMS (1982, 40) because 'It rests partly upon the conflation of Adomnan's references to the *tegoriolum* . . . with those to the *hospitiolum* . . .' As far as we are aware, neither we nor, more significantly, Professor Thomas have ever made such a conflation; we were all acutely aware of the documentary evidence for two buildings at the time of the excavation, explicitly acknowledged in Thomas's second interim report, *The Coracle* 1959, 12–17.
- 9 Charles Thomas, *in litt* to authors 1987, quoted with his consent.

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