

## Cille Donnain: a late Norse church in South Uist

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### ABSTRACT

*On a promontory on the western edge of Loch Kildonan, South Uist, in the Western Isles, are the ruins of a church known as Cille Donnain. The paper argues that this church and some buildings on the nearby Eilean Mór (reached by causeways) constituted an important 12th-century religious and political centre, comparable to Finlaggan in Islay; it is suggested that the site may have been the seat of a bishop. The church lies within an earlier dun-like site, which is also described, with suggestions about earlier loch levels here.*

### INTRODUCTION

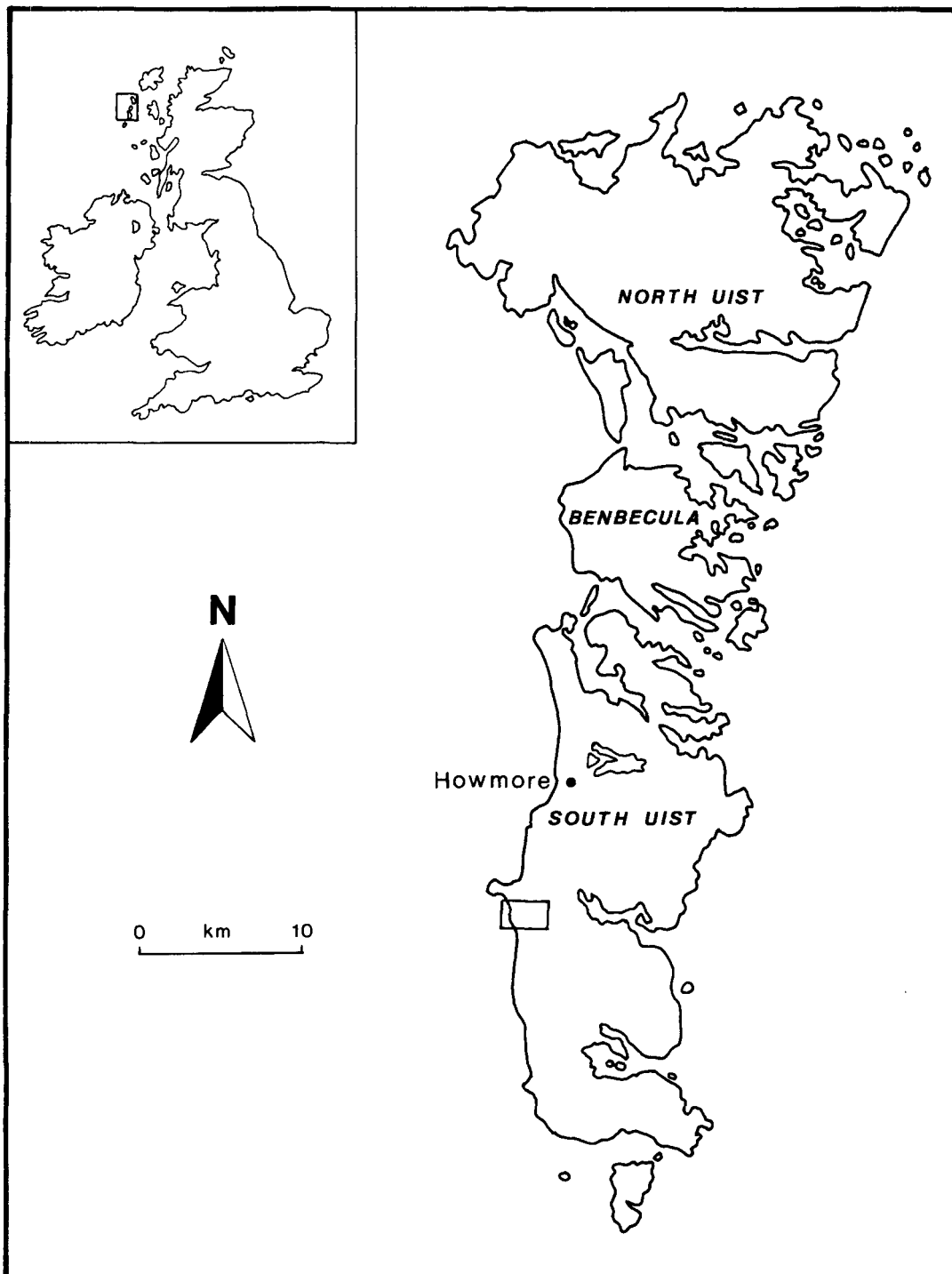
The site described here lies on what is now a promontory on the western edge of upper Loch Kildonan (NGR NF 731 282). It is about 2 km south-east of Rubha Ardvule, the most conspicuous headland on the west coast of South Uist (illus 1–4).

The site is known to local people, and was marked on the first edition (1881) of the 6-inch Ordnance Survey map as ‘Cille Donnain’ (in Gothic lettering) and ‘Ancient Burial Ground (disused)’. It appears on the current 1:10,000 map of the area as ‘Cille Donnain (site of)’. However, the RCAHMS volume for the area reported that ‘no trace of any building is now visible’ (1928, 120). The Royal Commission’s investigator visited the area only 18 days after the outbreak of the First World War, so his mind may have been on other matters. However, the consequence of his oversight was that this important site lay unrecognized by archaeologists outside the Ordnance Survey for 74 years.

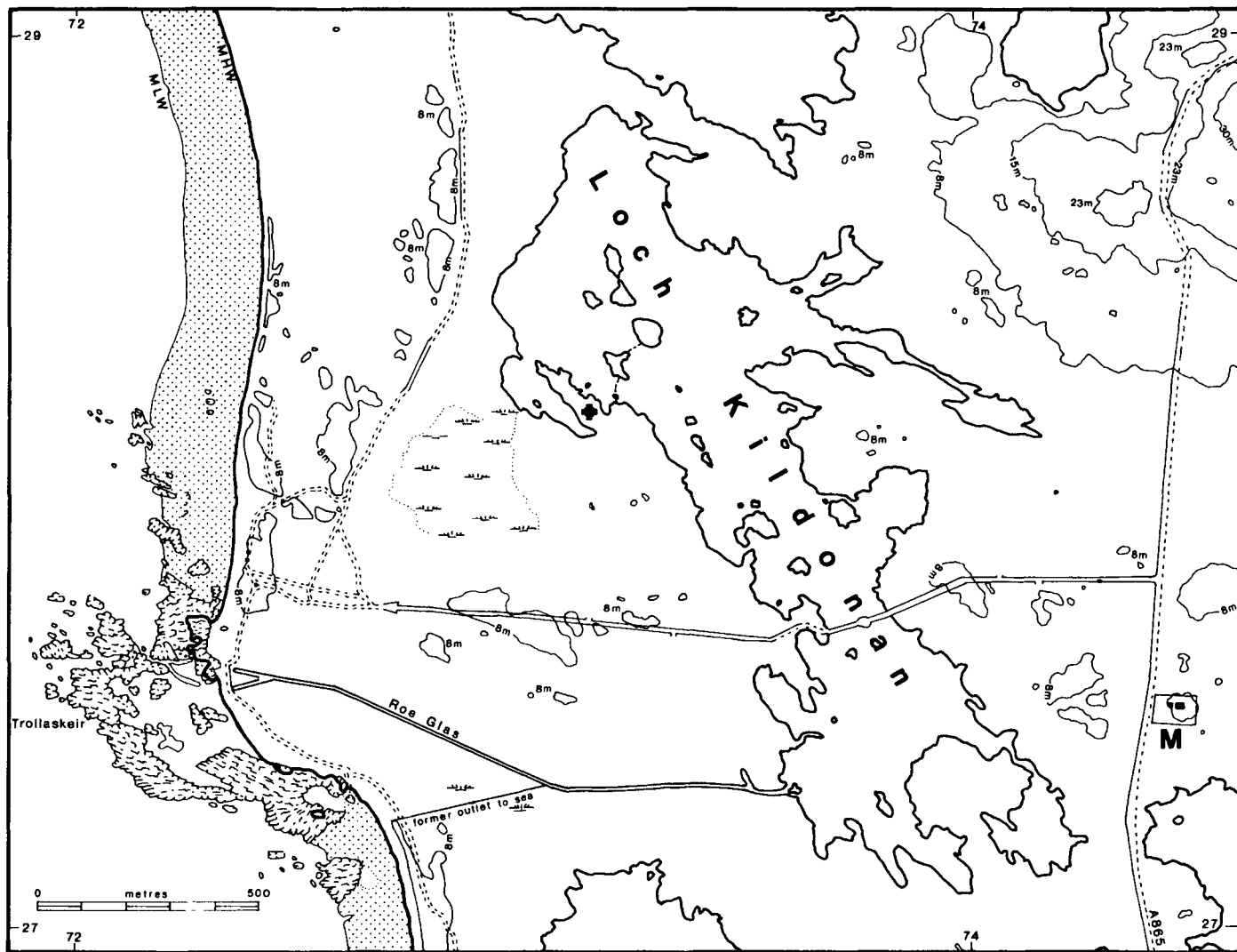
Cille Donnain first came to our attention in June 1988, during a field reconnaissance led by one of us (AF) as part of the SEARCH Project undertaken by the Department of Archaeology & Prehistory at the University of Sheffield. The ruined stone building at the centre of the site was identified as the remains of a church, and the presence of other stone-built structures was noted. The remains of the church and the other buildings occupied a locally conspicuous knoll, which had traces of the former existence of a wall around its outer edge.

The site was planned and studied in June 1989. An ELTA 46 EDM was employed to lay out the survey grid and to take levels for the contour survey, but the detailed plan (illus 5), on which the schematic plan (illus 6) is based, was produced by taking offsets from baselines within the grid. A more detailed plan of the church, produced by offset survey from an independent local baseline, was also made. The presence of yellow flag (*Iris pseudacorus*), which was densely distributed over much of the site, and localized patches of nettle (*Urtica dioica*) may have led us to overlook one or

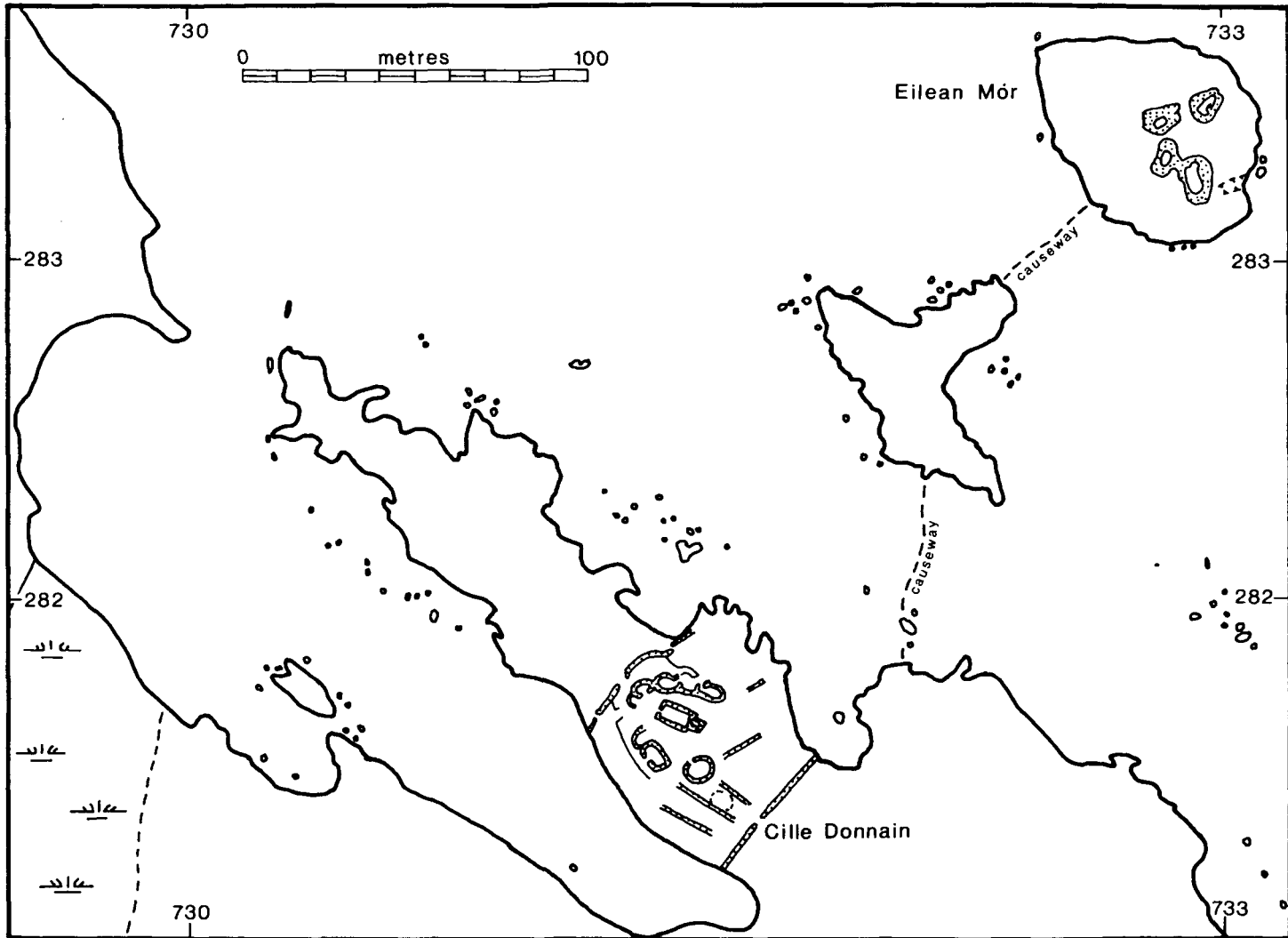
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ILLUS 1 General location map, showing the Uists and the location of illus 2



ILLUS 2 The Loch Kildonan area; the cross shows the position of Cille Donnain; M marks the position of Kildonan Museum. *Based upon the Ordnance Survey map © Crown copyright*



ILLUS 3 The relationship between Cille Donnain and Eilean Mór. Based upon the Ordnance Survey map © Crown copyright



ILLUS 4 Cille Donnain: the site from the south

two archaeological features, such as small orthostats, though we were aware of the problem and took steps to counteract it.

During the 1989 survey one of the survey party, Rexford Garniewicz, waded out to Eilean Mór, an island in the loch (NF 733 283). It proved to contain the overgrown ruins of four rectangular buildings, and to have been linked to the shore by a causeway, now largely submerged. This causeway incorporates an islet in its course. The Eilean Mór structures and the causeway were planned in June 1990 (illus 3 & 12).

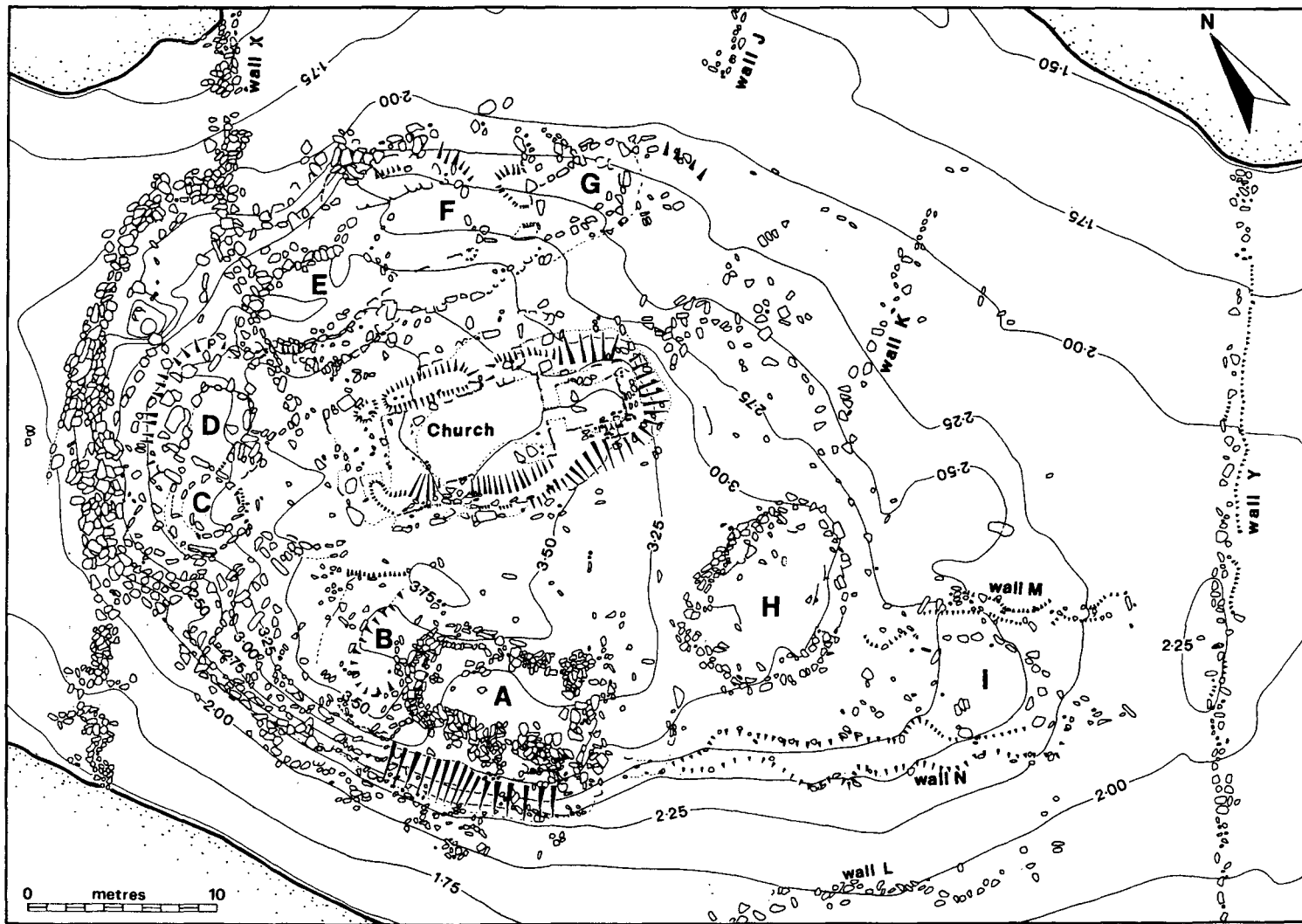
The remains on the Cille Donnain promontory and on the nearby island are described here in the belief that they constitute one of the most important archaeological sites on South Uist. In what follows, the historical notes are by A Woolf, the rest of the text mostly by A Fleming.

#### CILLE DONNAIN PROMONTORY (illus 3–11)

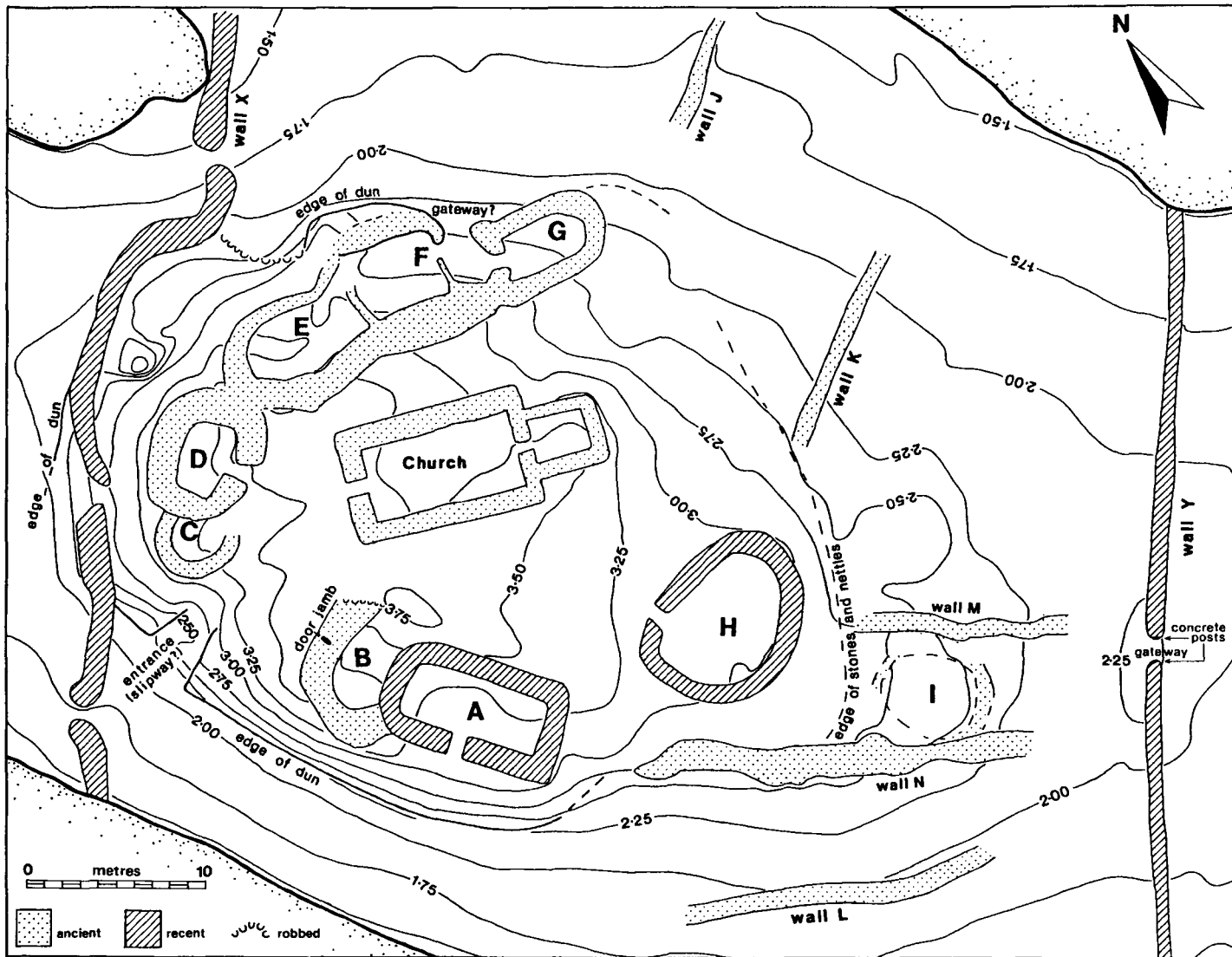
In the following account, the embellished knoll on which the structures stand (illus 4) will be referred to as the 'dun', the word being used here cautiously, and primarily as a convenient label. The poor preservation of the wall around the knoll, except on the south-west side, makes it impossible to be certain that there was an enclosed Iron Age site here. The site is larger than the normal South Uist 'island duns', and apparently the only local 'dun-like' site of comparable size is on a similar promontory/island location on the west side of Upper Loch Bornish (NF 742 291).

#### THE DUN

This is slightly ovoid in plan, measuring about 40 m east/west by about 35 m north/south. Its edges are marked variously by an external wall-face, wall ruins, or a break of slope. Preservation is poorest between Sites H and G, where nettles and stones fade out along a roughly defined line. In the area of Structure G most of the wall of the dun has been robbed out in antiquity. The north wall of Structure F may incorporate part of the dun's wall. To the north of Structure E the edge of the dun has been substantially robbed, certainly in relatively recent times and arguably also in



ILLUS 5 Cille Donnain: site plan



ILLUS 6 Cille Donnain: schematic version of site plan



ILLUS 7 Cille Donnain: southern sector of site from west, showing entrance/boat-slip at right foreground, southern edge of 'dun' and Structure A (background)

antiquity. In the north-west sector, the recent wall X has been built at the base of the slope marking the edge of the dun; here the builders were not able to make use of the dun's wall, which had probably been robbed out already. The basal course of the latter can be seen 2–3 m west of wall X, which here climbs on to the dun. The face of the dun's wall emerges from the east side of the 19th-century wall some 7 m further south; it must have had quite a pronounced angle change not far away before turning east. The next sector, from here to the south-east corner of Structure A, is the only zone where the edge of the dun is relatively undisturbed. It includes a well-preserved entrance, or slipway for a boat, some 3.5 m wide at the edge of the dun, giving access to a revetted passage or ramp some 4 m long, narrowing to about 2.2 m in breadth (illus 7). There is no evidence to contradict the view that this entrance was an original feature of the dun.

#### RECENT STRUCTURES

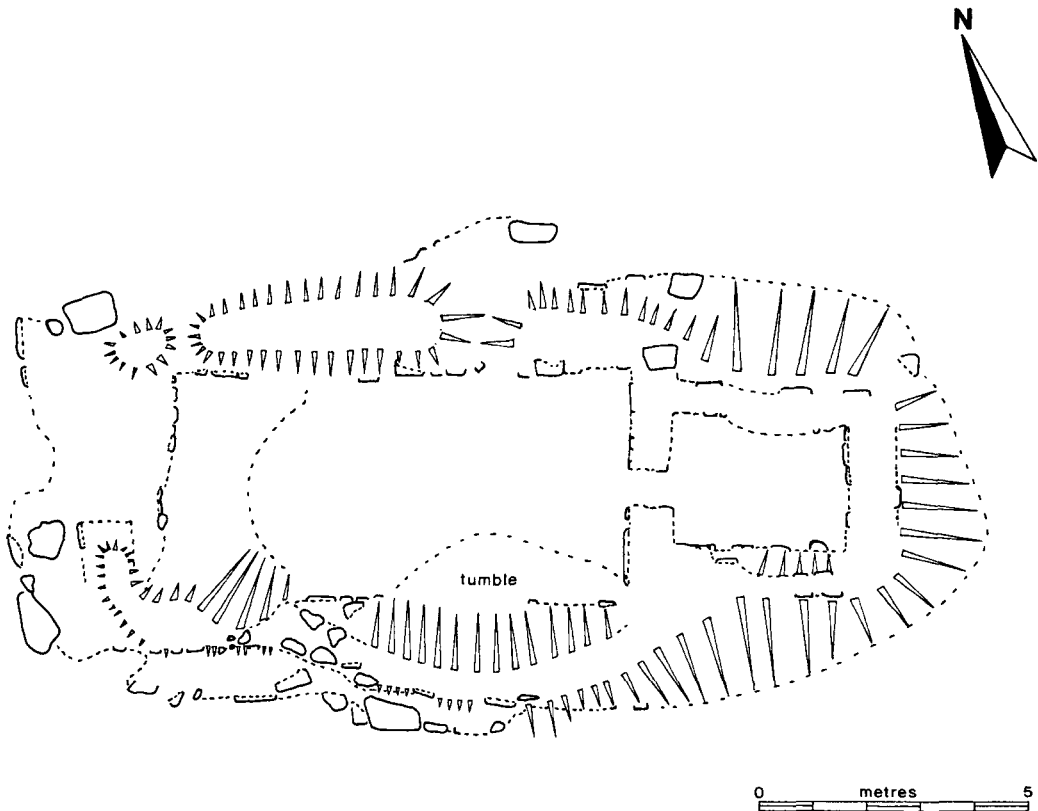
The most conspicuous ruins on the site are those of a rectangular stone building of fairly recent date (Structure A) with a doorway in its southern wall (illus 7 & 9). Although its western end slights the much older Structure B, there is no evidence that the building itself had a predecessor on the same site. The first edition of the 6-inch map shows that it was in existence by 1881. To the east of this building is Structure H, a small D-shaped walled enclosure which now carries a dense growth of nettles and was probably a stock-pen contemporary with Structure A; it was interpreted as such by local visitors to the site. The wall of Structure H is well preserved and apparently has been refurbished along its straight side; the entrance probably lay to the west, where there is a gap.



Wall X, constructed in much the same style as Structure A, was built across the promontory, its builders robbing, and partly re-utilizing, the western revetment wall of the dun. The other cross-promontory wall (Y), to the east of the site, may also date from the 19th century, but it could be more recent. It is not shown on the late 19th- and early 20th-century Ordnance Survey maps, and it has been built in a different style from that of Wall X. Patches of concrete laid for the insertion of posts flank a former gateway which is now the natural entry-point to the site, and stumps of fence-posts show that it has been used as a boundary quite recently.

#### THE CHURCH

The church (illus 8 & 9) had a nave, the internal measurements of which were about 8.52 x 4.4 m, and a rectangular chancel 3.1 m long x 2.3 m wide. Its orientation is about 106 degrees east of true north. Between nave and chancel is a narrow doorway. Entry to the nave was probably from a door in the centre of the west wall, an argument which is sustained more by the apparently unbroken nature of north and south walls, and the hollow-way – visible as site contours (illus 5 & 6) – running past the north wall, than from the west wall itself. The internal faces of the walls were apparently dry-built – there is no sign of mortar on the site – using carefully selected stones which produced good coursed masonry, a little of which survives. The walls of the chancel show that care



ILLUS 8 Cille Donnain: detailed plan of church



ILLUS 9 Cille Donnain church from west; Structure A is on the right

was taken with the outer wall-faces also, and a good quoin survives at the north-east corner, displaced slightly from its original position. The condition of the walls of the nave makes it impossible to observe the character of the outer wall-faces here.

The appearance of the remains suggests that the church was a simple, single-phase structure which was allowed to decay once it had fallen out of use. This at any rate is the suggestion conveyed by the uniform splay of tumble, well seen around the chancel, and the still well-defined wall-line, seen at its best along the north wall of the nave. The curvilinear outline of most of the south wall of the nave echoes a zone of tumbled stones within the building and is likely, therefore, to result from the wall's collapse.

#### STRUCTURES B, C & D

Structure B has been overridden by Structure A at the latter's south-west corner. There are signs of robbery on the external face of the structure's south wall, and a robbing face in the area of the north-west corner, only 3 m from the south-west corner of the church; considering the likely original position of this thick wall, the church builders were probably the robbers. The structure is sub-rectangular, with thick walls and a slightly dished floor. To judge from the comparable Structure D (illus 10), the entrance would have been in one of the long sides, in this case probably the western side, where there is a prominent and well-bedded upright slab at right angles to the building's wall. The building occupies the upper surface of the dun.

Structure C is a small, slightly ovoid structure which has been slighted by Structure D. It is represented now by traces of its wall-faces – most notably the pair of orthostats just outside the

south-west corner of Structure D – and its slightly dished interior. Structure D (illus 10) has thick walls enclosing a rectangular interior with a clearly defined entrance near the centre of the south-east side. To judge from the awkward relationship between them (illus 10), Structures D and E were not in contemporary use. The minimum straight-line distance between the *inner* wall-faces of D and E is 2.7 m, and as D's wall is about 1.6 m thick and E's about 1.1 m, there can have been no gap between them. If the two buildings respected each other they would have been either properly joined together or separated by a noticeable gap; in any case D and E differ markedly in their character and state of preservation. Almost certainly E is the later of the two buildings; the state of preservation of the walls is such that it is possible to walk past E over the remains of D but not vice versa.

#### STRUCTURES E, F & G (illus 11)

These pose several problems of interpretation. On plan they appear to form a 'range' some 23 m in length; in fact, a more 'organic' development is suggested by the different wall thicknesses, the poor to non-existent alignment of northern and southern walls, and the contrast between Structure E and the more rectilinear Structure F. Possibly E and F ended up as a two-roomed building, with G being different and arguably earlier.

If Structure E once had an independent existence, the entrance can only have been in the east wall. At present, the thin eastern 'wall' looks like a dividing wall in a two-roomed building comprising Structures E and F, but such a building might have been a later development involving a modification to the original plan of E. Structure E's walls are of varying thickness; the apparent



ILLUS 10 Cille Donnain: northern sector of site from west, showing Structures D, E and the church



ILLUS 11 Cille Donnain: Structures E and F from south-west

thinness of the north wall has been created by recent robbery and re-piling, probably to build wall X. The wall style is a combination of orthostats and blocks, and the floors of both E and F seem relatively level and tumble-free.

Structure F has a thick south wall, its north wall being thinner and its external face the same as, or coinciding with, the outer face of the dun's wall. The eastern wall is rather thin and indeterminate but contains an apparently clear entrance gap. If either E or F had an independent existence before the two were combined to make a two-roomed structure, it seems impossible to determine which was the earlier; the northern walls are confused by robbery and uncertainty about the original position of the edge of the dun, while the southern walls shed no light on the question.

Structure G has walls perceptibly thinner than those of the structures further west, with an apparently well-defined entrance 1 m wide. The low-lying position of the building suggests that it was built after the dun had been robbed out in this area, although its north-west corner looks like surviving dun material. Access to the space between Structures F and G is unimpeded from the north, but problematic from the south, with a piece of thick walling, perhaps a fragment of an earlier building, apparently blocking the approach.

#### STRUCTURE I

This is in a very dilapidated condition, but its remains form an identifiable platform (see contours, illus 5 & 6) just outside the edge of the dun, and there are stones forming a coherent enough pattern to justify their interpretation as fallen or leaning orthostats. This structure now looks slightly ovoid, apparently measuring 4–5 m internally.

Five unexplained and probably robbed-out lengths of apparent walling (J, K, L, M, N) occur in the sector to the east of the dun. Despite their positions on the plan, walls M and N do not look like the remains of a long stone-footed building on the ground. The position and appearance of wall M makes it just possible that it is the remains of a robbed-out causeway.

### EILEAN MÓR

Some 200 m north-east of the church site lies Eilean Mór, the only high island in this part of the loch. It is reached by two causeways, via an islet (see map, illus 3). Both causeways are now almost totally under water even in summer. The first causeway is now much more fragmentary than the second, which is broad and quite well preserved. On the big island are the remains of four structures; the plan (illus 12) reflects the fact that the original wall outlines are masked by tumble and dense vegetation. Rough measurements of these rectangular structures are set out as follows:

	<i>external size</i>	<i>internal size</i>	<i>doorway?</i>
Structure A	17 x 12 m	10–12 x 5 m	Possibly in east wall near south end, into hollow-way?
Structure B	13.5 x 7 m	>8 x 3.5 m	Probably not in end-walls; possibly in centre of east wall?
Structure C	12 x 7.5 m	<8 x c 4 m	Not in east end-wall; possibly in west end-wall or in north wall
Structure D	11.5 x 8 m	9 x c 4.5 m	Possible door-jamb at east end of north wall

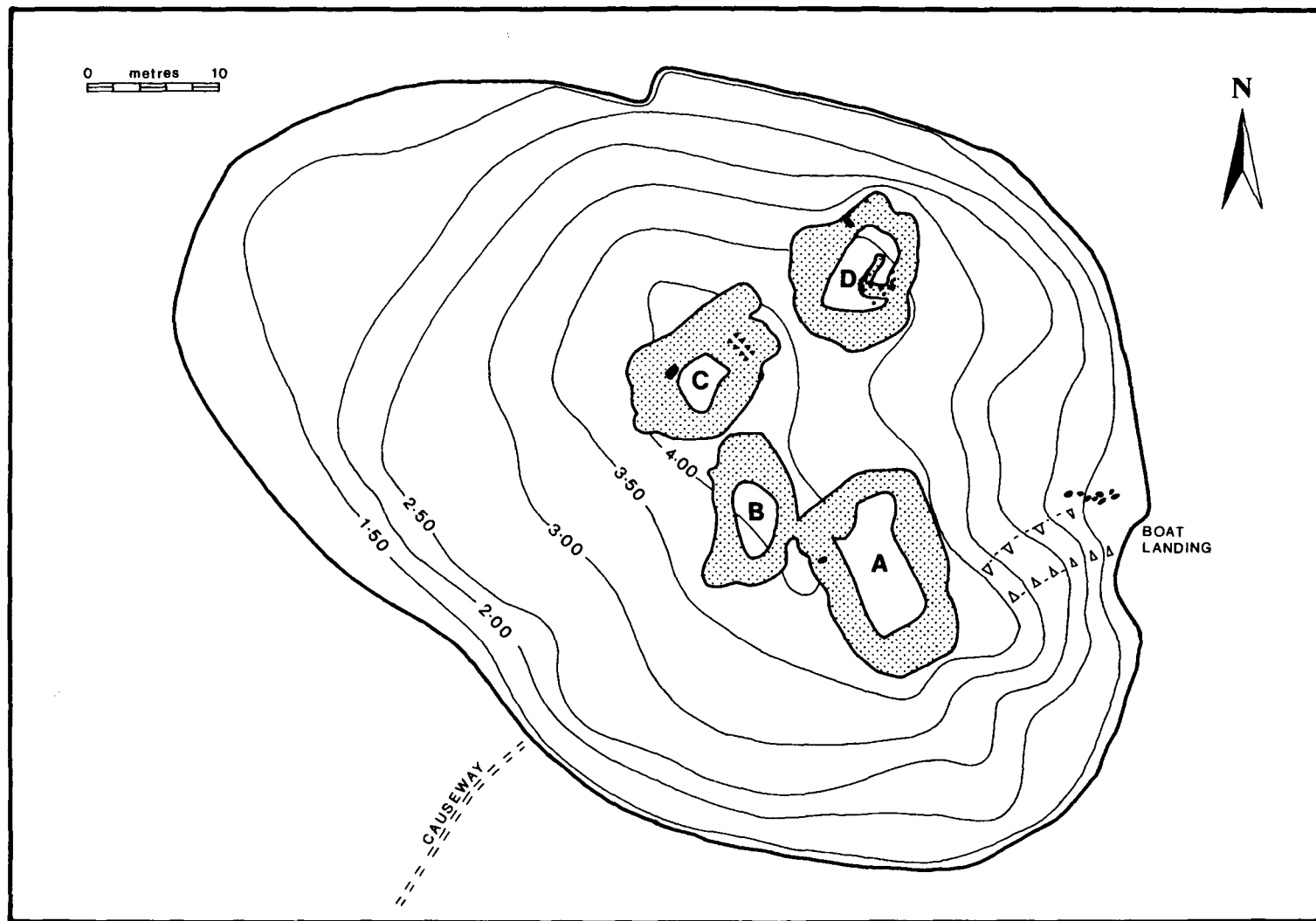
Structure A was a good deal larger than the other structures, with somewhat thicker and perhaps originally taller walls, and it now has a more deeply ‘dished’ interior. Despite their suggested entrance positions and the fact that Structure A apparently does not respect Structure B, the four structures may have been contemporary, arranged around a relatively level area to the east which would have been sheltered by the buildings. A’s relatively sheltered entrance gives on to a hollow-way leading to the shore, where some boulders have been pushed aside for boat access. Whether it should be regarded as the principal residence on the island, or a relatively late structure (because of its different character), is open to discussion. The horseshoe-shaped stone structure inside Structure D is a recent shooting-blind.

There is no evidence that the island has been fortified.

### SITE COMPARISONS AND INTERPRETATION

Virtually all the medieval chapels and churches in northern and western Scotland are now in ruins, or represented by place-names. Bicameral churches, with distinct, square-ended chancels, as at Cille Donnain, are a rare, distinctive group among those whose ground plans have survived. Those described in Royal Commission volumes are listed in the Appendix. It will be seen that there are three other known churches of this plan in the Western Isles: Teampull Mhuir, Vallay, on the north coast of North Uist, and two from the north-west coast of Lewis, Teampull Eoin (Bragor) and Teampull Pheadair (Shader). The locations of these four sites remind us that the most effective links between the medieval communities of the Western Isles would have been seaborne, and suggest that the ‘international’ sea-route would have been down the western side of the Long Island. On the north coast of Caithness is the church at Lybster (Reay). In Orkney five bicameral churches are listed, as well as three (Egilsay, Brough of Birsay and Eynhallow) which had additions to the bicameral form, and two (St Boniface, Papa Westray, and Pierowall, Westray) which appear to be large, late (?) versions of the same plan, and are problematic because they have been altered. In Shetland, six bicameral churches are listed: five on Unst and one on North Yell.

These churches are regarded as being broadly of 12th-century date (RCAHMS 1946: vol 1,



ILLUS 12 Eilean Mór: detailed plan

45). Three are possibly mentioned in the *Orkneyinga Saga*. Unfortunately, this has not clarified questions of dating and identification. For the church on the Brough of Birsay, Morris (1989, 13) has referenced the arguments over both these questions. For the church on Egilsay, the recent choice for dating has been between Fernie's suggestion (1988, 159) – the late 11th/late 12th centuries, but probably after St Magnus' martyrdom in 1116, and perhaps in 1136 when St Magnus' bones were transferred from Birsay – and Cruden's (1986, 13) argument for the late 10th/11th century, with a preference for the latter half of the 11th. Even in the relatively uncomplicated case of the chapel at Wyre, the building has been ascribed both to Kolbein Hruga (Simpson 1961, 5) and to his son Bishop Bjarni (Anderson 1873, xcvi), thus stretching it across much of the 12th century or even into the early 13th.

It will be seen from the Appendix that of this sample of 19 (excluding the two problematic cases) only the more complex bicameral churches of Brough of Birsay and Egilsay have combined nave and chancel areas significantly larger than Cille Donnain. Our site is one of a group of four, including two churches from Shetland – Kirk of Ness (North Yell) and St John's, Norwick (Unst) – and St Thomas', Rendall, Orkney, which are significantly larger than all the others. (If the Cross Kirk at Clibberswick, Unst, was bicameral – which is debatable – it might also have approached this size.) Relative to the others in its size group, Cille Donnain is distinguished by its long nave and its small, almost square chancel. Both the Shetland churches in the group were 'head-churches' in terms of Shetland's ecclesiastical organization (Cant 1975, 15). By contrast the other two measurable bicameral churches in the Western Isles are significantly smaller than Cille Donnain. The latter's relatively large size need not automatically imply high prestige (political or ecclesiastical) but in this kind of discussion the structures on Eilean Mór cannot be ignored entirely.

Together, Eilean Mór and Cille Donnain can be compared with the traditional seat of the Lords of the Isles at Finlaggan on Islay (RCAHMS 1984, 275–81). There is now a profusion of late medieval building ruins at Finlaggan. But it is arguable that the basic core of the site at Finlaggan consists of a prestige residence and a church, on an island, with a causeway leading to a much smaller island 30 m across with three buildings on it – Eilean na Comhairle (Council Island). The topography around Finlaggan reminded Munro (1961, 99) of the high status site at Tingwall in Shetland, also associated with council meetings. The unfortified Eilean Mór would fit the regional assembly ('thing') model well; a local informant told one of us (AF), without being prompted, that the tradition associated with Cille Donnain was that people came there from miles around, though this might also reflect later pilgrimage activity.

If Cille Donnain/Eilean Mór were modelled on Finlaggan, they are likely to date from before 1156, when the Hebrides were divided between Godred, King of Man, and his brother-in-law Somerled (note 1). If it is true (see Conclusion) that Lagman, son of Godred Crovan, had some sort of vice-regal position on the Uists, a firm connection with Islay, c 1100, is established, since Godred Crovan died on Islay and may have lived there. It is also suggested below that Donnain dedications were linked with the family of Godred Crovan rather than the family of Gille Adomnan/Somerled, which would imply a pre-1156 date for the site under discussion here.

## PALAEOGEOGRAPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It has been argued above that Cille Donnain and Eilean Mór are comparable to Finlaggan and to Tingwall in Shetland; if this is the case, Cille Donnain's size may also identify it as a high-status 12th-century church. If this was an important political and religious centre, it is worth considering its geographical context in more detail (illus 2).

Kildonan was mentioned in a charter of 1498 (Munro & Munro 1986, 228), and in a deed of 1625 (Macdonald 1978, 321, but here mis-identified as Kildonan on Eigg), where its five pennylands make it significantly smaller than its neighbours at Bornish to the north and Garryvaltos to the south. It also appears on the map of South Uist in the *Atlas Novus* published by Joannis Blaeu of Amsterdam in 1654. This was based on a manuscript map made around 1600 by Timothy Pont (Stone 1989). On Pont's and Blaeu's maps the position of 'Kildonnen' to the east of Loch Kildonan must refer to the former *clachan* whose ruined buildings survive today. The mysterious name 'Totanamasken' (perhaps 'ruins on the machair', which would be appropriate from an archaeological standpoint) seems to refer to an area nearer to Cille Donnain, apparently on the slightly higher ground to the south or on the machair to the south-west. Pont's manuscript maps usually mark churches with a standard symbol (Stone 1989, 17) but apparently he does not mark a church here; it would not be inconsistent with the ecclesiastical history of north-west Scotland if Cille Donnain was a roofless ruin by 1600. Kildonan is not marked on the maps of Mercator (1564) or Ortelius (1570), on which churches are the only non-natural features indicated.

It has recently been argued by Mrs G Maclean (pers comm) that the places marked on Pont's map suggest that he travelled through the western lochs by boat. Pont's map certainly shows what a good 'central place' the Cille Donnain/Eilean Mór site could have been. From this document it seems that only here and at Howmore was it possible to get to the inland lochs from the west coast. This may also have been dimly recorded by Mercator and Ortelius whose maps portraying South Uist as three islands may imply that mariners knew of two inlets on the east coast and two on the west. From the broad natural channel, which preceded the (artificial) Roe Glas to the south of Kildonan and is visible on the ground today (see *illus 2*), it would have been possible – according to Pont's map – to enter Loch Kildonan, and thence to travel north by boat into Loch Bornish and seemingly, via lochs and channels, virtually as far as Daliburgh in a southerly direction. This configuration pre-dates the coastal changes of c 1700 (Walker 1980, 13), and local drainage episodes. How far these water levels can be projected back into the Middle Ages is debatable, however (see below for further discussion). A voyager approaching from the east could get to within 4 km of Cille Donnain via Locheynort, from which the site would have been visible in the distance after a brief scramble on to the saddle at the head of Glen Kildonan. When the causeways were extant, anyone approaching Cille Donnain by boat from the east or south-east would have to pass close to Eilean Mór.

This high island provides a commanding view of a naturally defined unit of land to the east, centred on Glen Kildonan. To the west, the drastic coastal changes of about 300 years ago make the reconstruction of medieval topography a near-impossible task. However, it is likely that the area was occupied in the Middle Ages. Walker observed in 1764 that 'in South Wist the Foundations of Stone Walls are to be seen at the lowest Ebb, above half a mile from the present Floodmark' (Walker 1980, 75). On the machair, protruding stones, obviously parts of now-buried structures, are not at all uncommon. In 1975 a gilt-bronze Scandinavian brooch fragment of 9th/10th-century date was picked up near NGR 726 286, on the machair some 500 m north-west of Cille Donnain and the area has apparently also produced a material of late medieval date, including a silver ring of c 1300 (Graham-Campbell 1975, 213). The SMR records that 'a Viking ring-headed bronze pin' was found some 500 m further north-west at NGR 723 295.

For those sailing down the west coast of South Uist in the 12th century (incidentally the legend on Murdoch Mackenzie's map published in 1794 says: 'the stream of tide along this coast runs not above one Mile an Hour when strongest') the relatively undamaged Dun Vulcan, on what is now the southern edge of Rubha Ardvule, and currently under investigation by the Sheffield team, would have been a coastal landmark prominent enough to give rise to the Norse name 'Bornish', the fortification on the headland.



Thus there are several reasons, other than its position half-way along the South Uist coast, for suggesting that Cille Donnain/Eilean Mór would have been in an excellent location to fulfil a role as an important socio-political centre.

#### WATER-LEVELS ON LOCH KILDONAN

That the Cille Donnain promontory has not recently been an island is suggested by the presence of the 19th-century structures and the cross-promontory wall Y, and by the level of vegetational debris left stranded on the shore after the winter or spring of 1989–90, which suggests that the water-level nowadays increases by 40–45 cm in winter, approximately coinciding with the lower edge of yellow flag, some 48 cm above summer water-levels. A rise of some 70–80 cm above summer level would be required to turn the site into a permanent island now. However, present water-levels are substantially affected by the causeway across Loch Kildonan (as we have demonstrated by taking levels on winter flotsam on either side of it), and by the fact that Loch Kildonan is now drained artificially by the Roe Glas (see above and illus 2). The profile of the present-day shoreline of Loch Kildonan indicates that its water-level has been higher at some stage in the past, as must have been the case for some other local lochs for the same reason. At present, if June water-levels rose by about 1 m, there would be an island here. If this occurred in the past, a boat could have been brought right into the south-west entrance ('boat-slip') and the scenario might encourage the interpretation of wall M as the remains of a short causeway. Such a reconstruction would make the 'dun' quite comparable in size and topographic situation with the heavily damaged dun on Upper Loch Bornish (NF 742 291) which measures some 30–35 m across. It is also worth pointing out, however (N Fojut, pers comm), that the boat-slip could also have been used for depositing a boat high and dry out of the water.

A difference in time between the dun and the buildings on Eilean Mór is suggested by an argument from water-levels. If Cille Donnain was an unusually large 'island dun' in the Iron Age, it can be argued that there must have been a lowering of water-level between then and the 12th century, since with the water-levels required for the island dun the islet between Cille Donnain and Eilean Mór would not have been available for use as a 'stepping stone' by the medieval causeway-makers. If these arguments are correct, water-levels when the 'dun' was made would have been perhaps about 1 m above those in the 12th century.

In June 1992, loch levels were unusually low, and on the eastern shores of both Upper Loch Kildonan and Loch Bornish it was possible to observe rather primitive walls running from dry land (where they are fragmentary) into the waters of the loch, where they were visible either just below the surface of the water or projecting just above it. It is most unlikely that these walls relate to an early 19th-century phase of low (post-drainage) loch levels, and they are unlikely to date from the time of high precipitation and sand-blow during the post-medieval 'Little Ice Age'; Pont's map, which shows several islets in Loch Kildonan, suggests that 16th-century loch levels were similar to today's (since most of the present islets are low-lying). It is quite possible, on present evidence, that the walls are Neolithic/Bronze Age in date; but if they are not, and Iron Age levels were high (see above), the walls could well be medieval and relate to a time of even lower loch levels than represented by the Eilean Mór causeways, in other words somewhat earlier than the 12th century. This raises the possibility that rather more land was available to earlier medieval farmers (including Norse settlers?) in the area immediately east of the present-day machair, than one would imagine from the present appearance of the landscape.

These arguments about water-levels are not irresistible. Although there is a clear need for a scenario which accounts for the evidence for both markedly higher and markedly lower past loch

levels, much more work is required, especially on dating, and the above suggestions are offered tentatively. They do not necessarily apply to other lochs and duns in South Uist; as the first edition of the 6-inch map shows, their levels vary considerably, and each loch must be considered on its own terms.

#### OTHER BUILDINGS AT CILLE DONNAIN

The affinities of the other buildings at Cille Donnain, and their relationships to the church and the island dun, are more problematic. It is tempting to suggest that the church, the northern range of buildings (in their last phase of occupation?) and the slightly hollow passage-way between them (the natural approach from the end of the Eilean Mór causeway) were all in contemporary 12th-century use. The placing of churches or chapels on former prehistoric sites, including prestigious sites, is very common and has been noted before (eg RCAHMS 1946, vol II, 40, for Orkney). A notable case, for instance, occurs at St Tredwell's chapel on Papa Westray in Orkney, where the site is an island or near-island which, like Cille Donnain, is very close to the shore of the loch. On some of these sites the availability of building stone may have been the most important consideration. The various visible structures at Cille Donnain might relate to the dun and/or a possible early Christian religious site; as Fisher (pers comm) points out, in the latter case the peculiar characteristics of the re-occupied island dun might have ruled out the building of a cashel wall. However, it has to be said that Cille Donnain does not compare well with other known or alleged early Christian religious sites in the region. Perhaps the location of this place, on the rear edge of the occupied land of the machair, would have been too close to a zone of settlement, and hence too much 'of the world' for an early religious site to have been founded here.

#### HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The early ecclesiastical history of the Western Isles is lost to us. Almost all traditions relating to it survive only in high medieval form, save those relating to Iona. Even the martyrdom of Donnain on Eigg in 617 remains an isolated event impossible to contextualize. To what degree, if any, the medieval pattern of administration and dedication survives from the pre-Norse period is currently unknown. Cant (1984) argues, on what slim evidence exists, that the medieval system was of Norse origin and broadly similar to that of the Northern Isles. Whilst hypothetical similarities between the Northern and Western Isles are too often and too casually assumed, the present writers would concur with Cant that pre-Norse survivals are less likely. Only the excavation of a range of ecclesiastical sites across the Western Isles will adequately address the continuity question and this is unlikely to be forthcoming in the short term.

By the early 12th century, when historical sources again become relatively useful, control of the Western Isles was divided between two families: that of Godred Crovan († c 1095), often referred to anachronistically as the Kings of Man, and that of Somerled mac Gilla Brigte († 1164). A possible reading of diverse Irish annalistic references can link Godred's dynasty with the 9th-century Ivar the Boneless (Young 1981, 26–62), whilst from c 1400 (*Book of Ballymote*) Somerled's family were claiming descent from the Maccu Uais, one of the Argialla dynasties of northern Ireland (Sellar 1966). Whatever the truth of these claims it would be wrong by the 12th or even the 11th century to see the rival dynasties as representing Norse and Gaelic factions in the region. The situation was more subtle than that and the medieval civilization of western Scotland acknowledged its debt to both cultures.

Returning to ecclesiastical matters, it may be of note that dedications to Saint Donnain in

evidence today (Simpson 1935, fig 9) seem to be absent from the area controlled by Somerled in the mid-12th century. Apart from two dedications in Sutherland (then part of the Orkney Earldom) churches dedicated to Donnain are found in the northern and western Hebrides, the tip of Kintyre, south Arran and Galloway, areas which would seem, on the scanty evidence available, to have had closer ties to Godred Crovan's heirs. As Cant (1984) argues, an ecclesiastical pattern dating from this period, constructed after the end of the ravages of heathen Scandinavians, is much more likely to have survived to the present than one dating to the era of Colum Cille and Donnain themselves (whose success as missionaries in the isles is supported only by modern folklore). On this basis we might tentatively suggest that the cult of Donnain might have been particularly patronized by the Crovan dynasty. The story recorded in the *Aberdeen Cartulary* of the saint's martyrdom at the hands of Norse pirates (certainly untrue) might have been an appropriate embellishment to the passion of the favourite saint of kings claiming descent from the notorious Ivar.

Until Olaf Kleining's appointment of Wimund as Bishop of the Isles in 1134 (Young 1981, 88–95), we know of nothing certain concerning the ecclesiastical ordering of the Crovan kingdom. Olaf's charter of 1134 mentions the kingdom being 'rendered desolate under strangers' (Young 1981, 88–95), apparently referring to bishops from outside the kingdom, but it is unclear if the king was instituting a new arrangement or merely restoring an earlier order that had lapsed. The metrical *Manx Chronicle* mentions the names of earlier bishops (Roolwer, William and Hammond), but it is far too late and obscure to be of any use. Dublin and Orkney obtained bishops in the reigns of Sigtrygg († c 1038) and Thorfinn († c 1060) and it would seem unlikely that the Isles would have lagged by a century, even if the first bishops were court bishops rather than cathedral based. What we can say is that prior to 1134 the dominant role of Man in the kingdom, really a feature of the 13th century following the successes of sons and grandsons of Somerled, cannot be taken for granted. Even Wimund seems to have held power in the Hebrides as much as in Man. We should perhaps envisage 11th- and 12th-century bishops having residences and associated churches in each of the administrative regions of the kingdom, perhaps, though not necessarily associated with a royal residence (former royal *husabys* might be donated to the bishop for his maintenance creating mutually exclusive royal and episcopal circuits).

## CONCLUSION

A relatively early abandonment of the buildings on Eilean Mór seems indicated, given the absence of the characteristic large rectangular buildings of late/post-medieval type seen, for example, at Caisteal Bheagram and Dun Bhuide, on Benbecula, or for that matter at Finlaggan; the loss of Eilean Mór's original name and associated oral tradition also suggests that it did not survive into the post-medieval era. An obvious context for the early abandonment of Cille Donnain/Eilean Mór would be the loss of Norse control over the Isles after the battle of Largs in 1263, and the subsequent MacRuaidhri takeover, of which little is known in detail. If the church at Cille Donnain can be accepted as dating to the period when Godred Crovan's family held sway it may have been seen by the MacRuaidhri descendants of Somerled as a symbol of their ousted rivals and its deliberate desertion may have been encouraged. In recorded times, the favoured church on South Uist under the Lordship of the Macdonalds of Clanranald – descendants of the MacRuaidhris – was Howmore, the Church of Mary, which contains a chapel to Colum Cille, and where Clanranald chiefs were interred. Certainly the physical difference, in character and degree of preservation, between the buildings on Eilean Mór and those on Caisteal Bheagram – the nearest 'prestige settlement site' to Howmore – is mirrored by that between Cille Donnain and Howmore, with its group of rectangular chapels.

Garbled Icelandic accounts (the *Kings Sagas* and a verse by the Skald Gisli) seem to suggest that Lagman, Godred Crovan's son and heir (known as Ivistar Gramr, or Prince of Uist), may have held some sort of viceregal position in the Outer Isles during his father's reign (Vigfusson 1883, vol II, 241–2); if Lagman's base was indeed on Uist (and other interpretations of his title are possible), it is tempting to link him, and/or an associated bishop, with the Cille Donnain/Eilean Mór site. If this were the case, the life of the site as a prestigious centre would have been about 160 years, that is c 1100–c 1270. The church would have had a shorter history if it was built (for a local bishopric?) in the later 11th or early 12th century or if it was abandoned after Olaf's decision to create a national episcopacy in 1134, although it could have continued in existence as the base for the national bishop when on tour in the Uists.

How did Cille Donnain relate to the contemporary political and ecclesiastical geography of the *Sudreyar*? A brilliant recent study of the development of church-building and ecclesiastical organization for much the same time period in southern Sweden (Andersson & Anglert 1989) provides a depressing reminder of the state of our knowledge of medieval ecclesiastical geography of northern Scotland. Cant (1984, 12) has described it as 'scanty and tentative'. Cille Donnain's parochial status is not clear; Munro, writing in 1549, mentioned five parish churches for South Uist but named only three: Kilphedir, some 9 km south of Cille Donnain, and Howmore, some 8 km to the north, as well as 'ane parochin callit Vlmbhadla' (Munro 1961, 76). The first two survived into the mid-19th century (Innes 1854, 365–9). Spacing considerations suggest that one at least of Munro's parishes should have been located between Howmore and Kilphedir, in the Cille Donnain area, and it would be reasonable to suggest further parishes in the extreme north and extreme south (Kilbride?) of the island, to make five in all. This is speculative; Innes' list of chapels, which includes Cille Donnain, has a high frequency of apparently lost names and lost buildings, some of which could once have been more important. There is no reason to believe that late medieval parochial organization was fixed once for all time. A pessimistic view would be that in the Western Isles a combination of coastal erosion and sand invasion in critical areas, Norse re-use of earlier Christian sites, later modifications, and neglect at the time of the Reformation have combined to obscure the medieval pattern of ecclesiastical and political organization. In the southern part of South Uist, for example, it seems that there is now no trace of the churches at Kilphedir and Kilbride. However, one may suspect that the study of archaeological sites, place-names, settlement distribution and township boundaries in the geographically constrained and repetitive environment of South Uist should provide a closer delineation of the research frontier than conveyed by Cant's single sentence on this topic (1984, 11). Cille Donnain and Eilean Mór certainly add new terms to the equation. As a rare bicameral church, Cille Donnain's links are with the Northern Isles; its size and the link with Eilean Mór suggests that it may have been a head church, helping us to take the organization of Norse Christianity in the Western Isles as seriously as Cant suggests we should. It should not be forgotten that during the early years of Cille Donnain, people in the Western Isles were hearing about the building of St Magnus' cathedral in Kirkwall, and some of them may have been about to be presented with the four famous chess-sets – including bishops! – of walrus ivory later to be discovered at Uig Bay in Lewis (Taylor 1978). (The occasional portrayal of Hebrideans in the sagas as rather grim, superstitious people surely represents ethnic prejudice.)

The resemblance of the Cille Donnain complex to an under-developed Finlaggan suggests an importance, however brief, within the Hebridean political sphere, as well as implying origins in the earlier, rather than the later, 12th century. That the site's importance was fairly short-lived, and apparently supplanted in the area by Howmore, must remind us of the impermanence and instability of political power at the time in question, and the associated vulnerability of

ecclesiastical organization. Clearly, it must not be assumed that the spatial pattern of ecclesiastical organization was laid down once for all time; indeed, irregularities or surprises occurring within an emergent pattern may be important clues to significant historical events.

## NOTE

After the decisive battle, Mull and Islay were separated from Skye and Lewis, which continued to send representatives to the Althing in Man – hence the eight Keys (members) from the Out Isles who formed one-third of the membership of the Tynwald in 1422 (Cubbon & Megaw 1942). After ‘reunification’ of the Hebrides, in the time of the Macdonald lordship, the council at Finlaggan had 16 members, four each from four divisions: Skye, Lewis, Mull and Islay.

## APPENDIX

### BICAMERAL CHURCHES IN NORTHERN SCOTLAND

This list is unlikely to be complete; it is based on Royal Commission volumes (RCAHMS 1911, 1928, 1946). Dimensions are in metres (sq m in brackets) and are internal except where stated.

<i>site</i>	<i>nave</i>	<i>chancel</i>	<i>total area</i>
<b>WESTERN ISLES</b>			
Cille Donnain	8.5 x 4.4 (37.4)	3.1 x 2.3 (7.1)	(44.5)
Teampull Eoin, Bragor, Lewis	6.1 x 3.4 (20.7)	2.8 x 2.1 (5.9)	(26.6)
Teampull Pheadair, Shader, Lewis	6.8 x 5.1 (external) c 5.6 x 3.4 (internal)	3.5 x 3.8 (external)	(48 external) (c 22 internal)
Teampull Mhuir, Vallay	dimensions unknown		
<b>ORKNEY</b>			
Wyre	5.9 x 4 (23.6)	2.4 x 2.2 (5.3)	(28.9)
St Thomas, Rendall	7.1 x 4.3 (30.5)	4.4 x 3 (13.2)	(43.7)
Linton, Shapinsay	5.8 x 4.1 (23.8)	2.4 x 2.3 (5.5)	(29.3)
St Nicholas, Papa Stronsay	4.6 x 3.7 (17)	2.1 x 2.8 (5.9)	(22.9)
Cross-kirk, Tuquoy, Westray	5.8 x 4.2 (24.4)	2.8 x 2 (5.6)	(30)
<b>ORKNEY: COMPLEX CASES</b>			
Egilsay	9.1 x 4.7 (42.8)	4.6 x 2.9 (13.3)	(56.1)
Eynhallow	6.3 x 3.5 (22)	3.8 x 2.7 (10.3)	(32.3)
Brough of Birsay	8.9 x 4.9 (43.6)	3.3 x 3.1 (10.8)	(54.4)
St Boniface (Papa Westray) and Pierowall (Westray) are omitted because of their late/modified character; also St Brides (Papa Stronsay) and Holm of Aikerness (Westray) because of paucity of detailed information.			
<b>SHETLAND</b>			
St John's, Norwick, Unst	8.1 x 4.1	4.9 x 2.7	(46.4)
Meal Colvidale, Unst	3.7 x 3.4 (12.6)	2.4 x 2.3 (5.5)	(18.1)
Kirkaby, Westing, Unst (Dryden's plan)	4.2 x 3.7 (15.5)	2.9 x 2.1 (6.1)	(21.6)
Uyea, Unst	5.2 x 3.8 (19.8)	not measurable	(c 24?)
Cross Kirk, Clibberswick, Unst	overall external length 13.5 x 6.7		
Kirk of Ness, North Yell	6.3 x 4.5 (28.3)	4.1 x 3.5 (14.3)	(42.6)
St Mary's, Sand, Sandsting	not measurable		
<b>CAITHNESS</b>			
Lybster, Reay	5.5 x 3.3 (18.1)	3.5 x 3.3 (11.5)	(29.6)

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