West Highland and Hebridean settlement prior to crofting and the Clearances: a study in stability or change?

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ABSTRACT

Prior to their reorganization into crofts or their clearance for sheep, farming townships of the west Highlands and Islands were generally organized around small irregular clusters of settlement, known as clachans or bailtean. *For some, these small irregular clusters are an archaic settlement form with roots back in late prehistory. This paper argues for a different interpretation of their character and chronology. Using a mix of documentary, cartographic and field data, it argues that the settlement morphology of* bailtean *was not fixed or stable, but in a continuous state of flux, with individual house-sites being regularly abandoned and reoccupied. In addition, it is argued that their nucleated form may have replaced an earlier more diffused pattern, and that the switch between the two may not have begun until the late medieval period and was still incomplete as a process even in the 18th century. In a cross-reference to work on field patterns, it is argued that this adjustment of settlement accompanied a shift from a field economy based on enclosures to one based on runrig open fields.*

INTRODUCTION

Standard interpretations of west Highland and Hebridean landscapes prior to crofting and the Clearances emphasize the central position of the *baile*. As a settlement form, the baile – or what some have called the clachan[1] – was a small, irregularly shaped cluster of houses. As a socio-agrarian unit, it was the landholding framework through which other vital institutions such as runrig open fields and infield/outfield cropping were organized. Like the latter, it has been seen as an archaic and deeply conservative form. Indeed, its central organizing role made it the prime conserving force behind the whole institutional structure of traditional landscapes. Some have talked freely of late prehistoric antecedents. In effect, the history of Highland and Hebridean landscapes across nearly two millennia is seen as a history of the baile. Yet it is a history that has been taken too easily for granted.

As a settlement form, the character of the baile has been approached in two ways. First, some writers have looked at it through 18th- and 19th-century documentary sources and

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through late-surviving field evidence. Gailey, for instance, adopted a large-scale regional approach using early maps, air photography and field survey to analyse the nature of those *bailtean* whose physical remains(ie wall footings, kailyards) survived the reorganization of some into crofts and the clearance of others for sheep (Gailey 1962b, 155–77). The results of his survey, which concentrated on parts of Argyll, did not question the antiquity of the baile but they did shed light on its form at the point when change was about to sweep it aside. Instead of finding a uniform pattern of small, irregular clusters, Gailey was forced to distinguish between what he called irregular/amorphous and linear/rectangular clachans, the latter being interpreted by him as a late (post mid-18th century) variant of the former. In addition, he distinguished further between nucleated forms, the prime type, and a lesser type which he described as dispersed or made up of a number of small scattered clusters. Again, he saw the latter as a late variant of the former (Gailey 1962b, 164). A comparable survey was carried out by Crawford on the bailtean of North Uist using 18th-century rentals and data culled from the Reid plan (1799–1800) of the island. Far from revealing a timeless plan of settlement, his survey hinted at short-term flux both at a broad settlement level and at the level of the individual house (Crawford 1965). Fairhurst's work on the pre-Clearance plans available for Strathnaver in Sutherland also provides a broad overview of the baile as it appears on the eve of change. Compared with stock assumptions, what stands out about the plans which he reproduced is the extent to which settlement at sites such as Rosal appeared loosely dispersed around the edge of arable land rather than being nucleated or concentrated at a particular location (Fairhurst 1964, pl II, III).

Attempts to excavate the origins and history of the baile as a settlement form provide us with the second approach to the problem. To date, the results have not been conclusive. Fairhurst's work on Lix in Perthshire provided a fine reconstruction of a cluster of townships (East and West) on the eve of their clearance in the 18th century (Fairhurst 1969a), but his efforts to dig deeper into their history produced what seemed a negative result. Exacavation of the main settlement focus of East Lix produced no trace of pre-18th-century occupation. Fairhurst explained this absence by suggesting that – as with other parts of the region–there may have been a shift from the use of perishable building materials (ie wattle, turf) to stone c 1700 (Fairhurst 1969a, 191). If so, then the problem of locating pre-1700 settlement becomes more difficult, a case of looking for post-holes or analysing soil chemistry rather than the easier task of looking for wall footings though, in the right circumstances, turf wall footings can survive. A more ambitious excavation has been carried out by Crawford and Switsur at Coileagan an Udail (the Udal), a site at the northern tip of North Uist. This was a baile which – like a number of others along the western side of the Outer Hebrides – had been overwhelmed by sand, possibly during the great sandblow of 1697. However, more unusually, successive occupations of the site over a long period of time had led to the formation of two tell-like structures. In Crawford and Switsur's words, each tell comprised 'a massive build-up of semi-insulated deposits formed and retained in discernible and consistent fashion' (Crawford & Switsur 1977, 126). Potentially, this excavation offers not only an understanding of this baile at the point when it was overwhelmed by the sand, but also an understanding of its earlier history and antecedents. When fully published, the excavation results may prove to be a benchmark in our understanding of the problem. The site provides for the Hebrides, if not necessarily for the mainland, a detailed typological succession of settlement structures over the very long term. Of direct relevance to any history of the baile is the fact that even over the historic period, there were important shifts in the nature or style of settlement structures. Thus, at the Udal, the Hebridean blackhouse, the assumed building-

block for Hebridean versions of the baile, does not have a direct lineage with the Norse longhouse. The end-on arrangement of living-space and byre in the latter survived down to about the late 15th century when it gave way to a side-by-side arrangement (Crawford & Switsur 1977, 131–3).

Yet for all the value of the Udal as a site, there are vital aspects of the problem on which it may be a poor guide. In a sense, its very virtue is also a handicap. For reasons that have to do with the geomorphological nature of the Udal, settlement has accumulated on the same two sites over a very long period of time producing tell-like formations (Tell A & B). It is these tell-like formations that Crawford and Switsur have so effectively exploited to produce their successional typology of occupation. But therein lies the problem with the site. For the west Highlands and the Hebrides, its tell-like formation is exceptional, although settlement mounds have been recorded on Sanday, Orkney (Davidson, Harkness & Simpson, 1986). This does not prevent it from telling us a great deal about changes in building style, the moments of cultural or socio-political change or about the shifts between occupation and desertion, but what it says about how the baile as a settlement form developed needs to be assessed carefully. If the baile really was a longstanding, conservative institution, one anchored to a specific form and layout then, arguably, we might expect the tell-like accumulation of occupation apparent at the Udal to be more widespread. The fact that it is not may suggest that more usually, west Highland and Hebridean settlement had a different history behind it, one whose impact on the landscape was less accumulative around particular sites: this could be because more perishable building materials were used, or settlement was more dispersed, or because it was subject to regular shifts of site. Even at the Udal, the changes detected by Crawford and Switsur in building type, in the amount of settlement, and in how it was disposed on the ground do not support the idea of the baile as a static, archaic form (Crawford & Switsur 1977, 131–3; Stewart & Stewart 1988, 311). Indeed, viewing the problem generally, Crawford has questioned bland assumptions about its antiquity (eg Crawford 1983 363).

Building on this last point, I want to argue that the elusiveness of the baile as a problem may not be because there is a deficiency of data about how it developed, but because our working propositions about it are wrong. Far from being a static form whose early origins can be excavated by finding the right site and digging deeper, there are grounds for considering two new propositions about its character. First, there is evidence to suggest that in some cases the ground-plan of a baile – as even the Udal hints at – was subject to regular flux, as houses were built and then later abandoned on a regular basis. Second, and more significant, there is evidence to suggest that as a nucleated settlement form, it developed quite late, possibly from as late as the 13th century onwards, and that for many bailtean the process of nucleation was never actually completed. Needless to say, if we accept this last point, defining the nature of medieval settlement in the west Highlands and the Hebrides ceases to be a question about what early forms of baile looked like and becomes instead the wholly different question of what type of settlement preceded it.

HIGHLAND AND HEBRIDEAN SETTLEMENT AS PROCESS?

Writing in the mid-18th century, an English army officer on a visit to the north of Scotland observed that whereas back home they built their houses of stone and pastured their cattle on turf, here, in the north of Scotland they built their houses of turf and pastured their cattle on stone (*OSA* VIII 1793, 6–7). Crawford has cautioned against placing too much weight on

such references (Crawford 1983, 355). Yet notwithstanding his reservations, the case for the use of perishable raw materials is well founded, albeit through documentary and published sources rather than archaeological data (Fairhurst 1969b). Quite apart from its significance for the history of housing, this has far-reaching implications for the problem of settlement morphology. The dismantling of such houses, down to and, in some cases, including the walls (eg *OSA* VIII, 375–6), was a regular feature of many townships. As a practice, it was linked in part to the re-use of the materials involved (thatch, turf, peat) as manure but whether this re-use was the reason why dismantling took place in the first place is unclear. In some areas, though, a contributory factor was the scarcity of timber, with tenants on some estates being allowed to remove all timber, including roof couples, at the end of their occupancy.

The use of perishable raw materials for house construction was recognized and documented by Gailey in his review of Highland rural settlement. When 'we examine contemporary literature and other documentary sources, wherever Highland peasant houses are mentioned or described from before 1750 or 1760 almost invariably houses built of some material other than stone are involved' (Gailey 1962a, 227–38; 1962b, 162). Amongst the contemporary literature that Gailey had in mind was that produced by travellers such as Burt and Boswell, whose comments can hardly be classed as references to the curious or exceptional. Writing in 1726, Burt described the typical house of Lochaber as turf-based (Burt 1876, Letter XIII), whilst Boswell, travelling through Skye with Dr Johnson in 1773 *observed that houses in Sleat 'in general are made of turf'* (Boswell 1910, 138). Other sources bear out this picture of ordinary peasant houses being built of perishable materials in certain areas. For example, the documentation generated by the Forfeited Estates provides a number of references. Thus, a report on Barrisdale, on the northern edge of Knoydart, in about 1755 described how 'all the houses of this Country are those Called Creelhouses And are made up of Stakes fixt in the ground and the boughs & branches of trees betwixt these stakes, and covered with turf on the roof and Sides'.[2] Another source for the area confirms that local houses were 'made of creel' apart from a few stone-built houses which existed at Invergusran on the western shore of Knoydart.[3] A petition by a tenant on the Lovat estate in 1767 talked about his house being 'a creel-house, after the ordinary manner of the country' with 'earthen walls' (Millar 1909, 137). Another petition by another tenant on the Lovat estate referred to his grandfather building a house of stone and mortar, 'practices quite new in that country, where the tenants built their dwelling houses of Turff and earth only and their barns with salke and rue' (Millar 1909, 105).

In a number of cases, the use of perishable materials for house-construction is documented through attempts to 'improve' housing. These attempts appear almost with the earliest documentation of estate management. Thus, in 1733, the Argyll estate issued management clauses banning tenants 'in the future' from trying 'to wattle their houses', a restriction possibly prompted as much by concern over wattle's consumption of scarce timber or the use of turf as by its concern to improve housing.[4] By the mid-18th century, tenants – like those on the Kintail and Lochalsh portions of the Seaforth estate[5] – were being offered compensation for housing, but only if they rebuilt in stone. The MacLeod estate went further. In a series of regulations which it drew up for the various parts of its properties in Skye and Harris, it required farmers to improve their houses and stipulated that 'the walls of all these dwelling-houses and office-houses to be new built or repaired, shall be made of stone and lime, or of stone and clay, or mortar, and no feal [turf] at all in any walls of houses' on pain of a fine.[6] Elsewhere, the distinction between the extensive use of perishable raw materials and more durable houses built of stone and mortar is conveyed more obliquely. When

Alexander Low surveyed Ardnamurchan and Sunart in 1807, he advised that crofters in some townships be bound 'as their present houses fall down (which will be in any case at no very distant period with many of them) to remove to the Road-side and build them with stone and lime'.[7] John Blackadder's careful distinction on the Macdonald estate in Skye between those who lived in 'miserable huts' and those who had built 'houses' for themselves probably had in mind such a distinction.[8] Yet despite this pressure in the 18th century to improve housing, houses continued to be built of perishable materials. In 1927, the District Officer of Health for the Uists described a small group of turf houses at Blashval. The houses, each of which were large enough to have both humans and cattle under the same roof, had been built on land controlled by the Department of Agriculture making the latter – as the District Officer pointed out – their landlord![9] In the 1930s, Curwen published a remarkable photograph of a Hebridean house built out of peat that was still being lived in at the time it was photographed (Curwen 1938).

Acknowledging the importance of perishable raw materials in certain parts of the Highlands and Islands is only part of the problem. What also comes across from 18th-century sources is the extent to which the use of such materials, both for walls and as roofing matter, was integrated with husbandry practices. Roofs were stripped regularly, often annually; the turf base and the thatch or heather cover – both impregnated with soot – provided a potentially rich manure (*OSA* XIX 1797, 266; *NSA* XIV 1845, 268; Wills 1973, 64; Dodgshon & Olsson, 1988). Where walls were built of turf and earth infill, or faced with them, these also were dismantled on a regular cycle. The *Old Statistical Account* report for Creich parish (Sutherland) talked about a three-year cycle (*OSA* VIII 1793, 375–6). Data for the Barrisdale Estate suggest a ten-year cycle or longer.[10] When we read that communities built turf houses despite having an abundance of building stone, then clearly we cannot discount the possibility that their choice of building material was designed with the needs of husbandry in mind.[11]

However, other factors were involved. When the Barony Court of Menzies decided in 1698 that there should be only one cottar house on each third of Camserney, near Aberfeldy, it ordered the surplus 'to be razed to the Ground'.[12] Comparable instances of houses being 'cassin doune' by court order can be documented for the extreme edge of the Highlands (Extracts 1852, 218). Clearly, such houses were not regarded as a form of estate capital, something to be conserved. Seen over the 17th century and before, a further source of flux was provided by inter-clan feuding. Many of the reports of feuding involved not simply the theft of stock and the destruction of field crops but the burning and destruction of houses. Reports that whole townships were ransacked and destroyed are commonplace, as when broken men of the Macgregors raised fire in the houses and barnyards of the £80 land of Luss, on the western shore of Loch Lomond, in 1612 (Macphail 1934, 219–21). We can make more sense of this random and easy destruction once we appreciate the extent to which many farmhouses and outbuildings were temporary, flimsy constructions, easily demolished or torched.

Though it did not necessarily lead to the wholesale destruction of houses, the problems caused by the scarcity of timber also had an effect. Court records and 'articles of set' make it clear that on some estates, tenants were allowed to remove the timber used for roof couples, doors and internal partitions at the end of their lease or agreement. Regulations covering the whole of Skye, issued by a meeting of the Justices of the Peace in 1788, declared that 'no Flitter in Future be allowed to break down his house or carry off the timber, or thatch provided that he is paid to the value of his timber, in either timber or cash'.[13] Attempts to
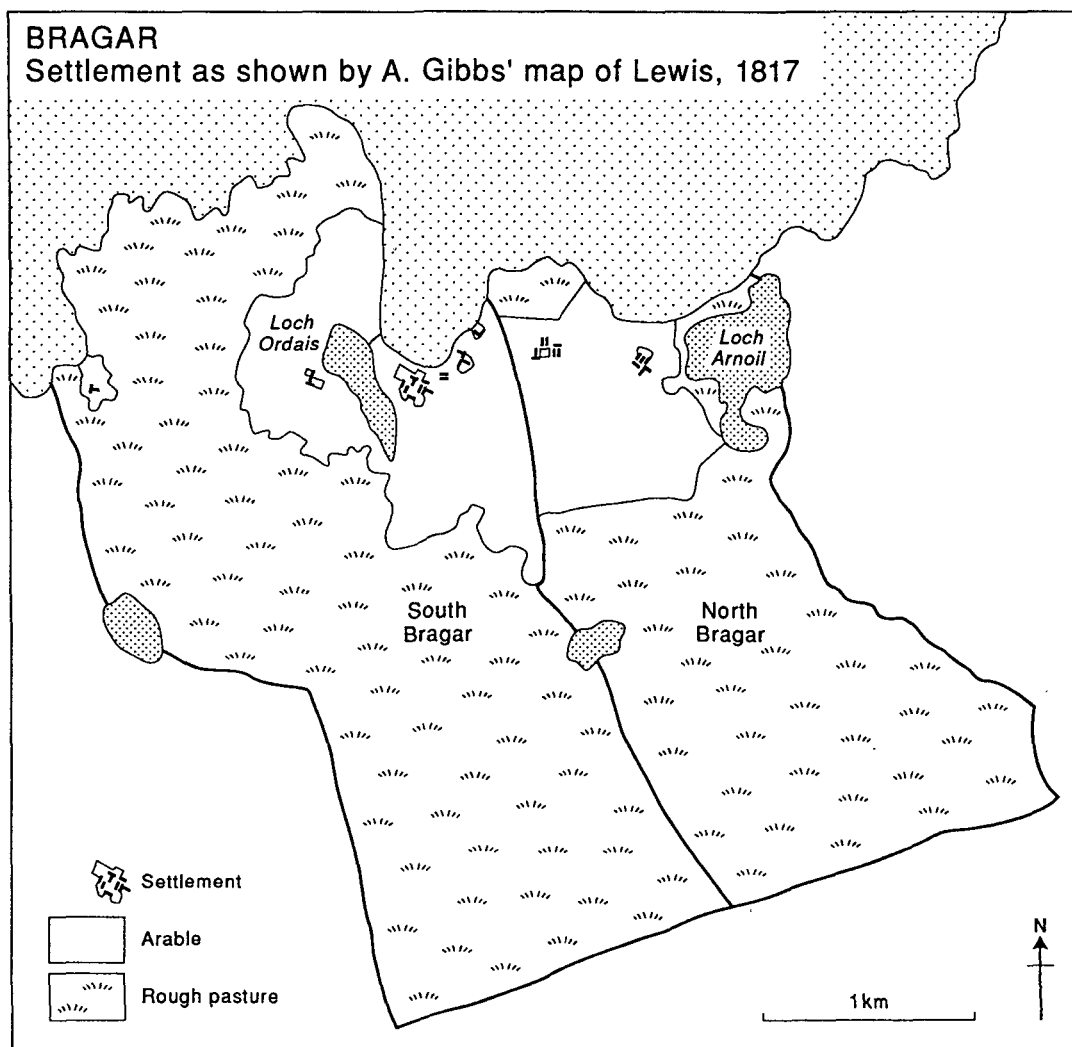
control the practice – though not to abolish it – can be documented for other areas.[14] With so many Highland and Hebridean tenants entering and leaving holdings on a short-term basis, many houses must have been reduced regularly to simply their wall footings, almost on a routine basis.

Viewed overall, this evidence for the temporary nature of peasant housing hardly suggests that west Highland and Hebridean settlement was laid out on a fixed or timeless plan. For a variety of reasons, many settlements may have been subject to a continuous process of change, with regular cycles of destruction and renewal as tenants exploited some of the nutrients locked up in turf walls, roof turf and thatch, as they carried away scarce roof timbers, doors and partitions, and rebuilt houses destroyed in feuds. Seeing this in terms of morphology, we can expect the exact shape and siting of settlement to have been subject to continuous shifts. To this extent, Highland and Hebridean settlement was about process as much as about structure. The kind of discipline which we see estates introducing after the creation of crofts, with crofters being forced to locate their houses along new roads, was wholly lacking prior to crofting.[15]

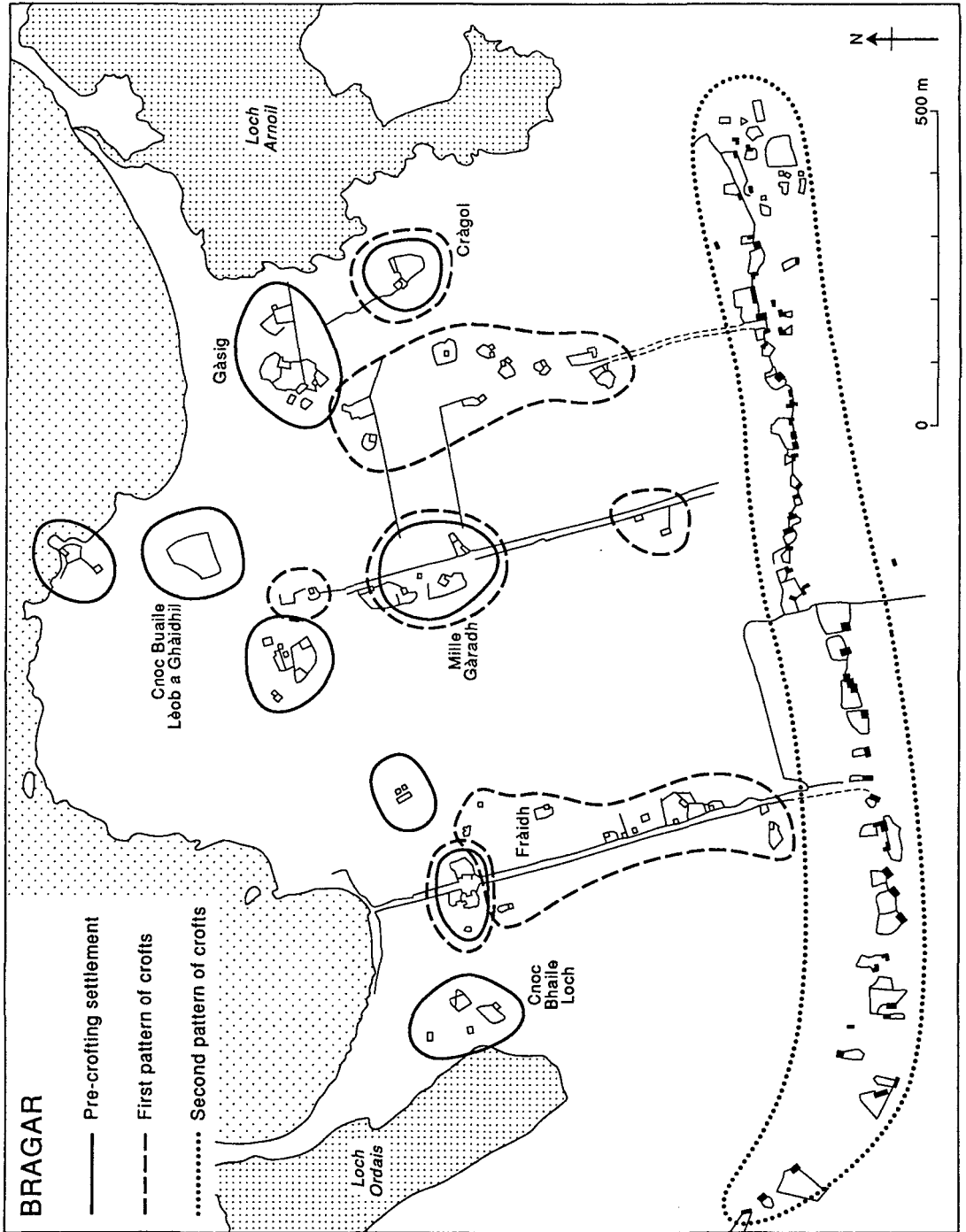## THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE BAILE: NUCLEATED OR DISPERSED?

In his review of Highland settlement, a review based on the field evidence for pre-clearance/pre-crofting settlement in mainland Argyll, Gailey drew the distinction between the typical nucleated baile and a small minority of sites whose settlement appeared loosely dispersed. He argued that the latter had been formed by the overflow of settlement from a central cluster and that this had occurred quite late, in some cases as late as the 18th century (Gailey 1962b, 164). I want to argue for a different conclusion for this apparent dispersal of settlement in some bailtean. Using evidence from Lewis and Skye, I wish to suggest that more dispersed forms preceded nucleated forms and that the shift between them took place relatively late. In effect, what we see in the 18th century is the product of an incomplete adjustment, with nucleated forms having generally, but not entirely, replaced an earlier, more dispersed form. Furthermore, just as the nucleated baile formed the logical complement to small open-field systems based on runrig, I also wish to propose that the earlier pattern of dispersed settlement may have been linked to an earlier pattern of landholding based on enclosed fields.

The case for an earlier pattern of dispersed settlement can be established by looking at a number of specific townships – for a start, those of North and South Bragar (NB 2948) on the north-west coast of Lewis. As settlements, these are complex but informative sites. An outline glimpse of their layout (illus 1) prior to their reorganization into crofts is provided by an 1817 plan of Lewis drawn up by A Gibbs but based on an earlier survey (1807–9) by G Chapman. His plan outlines the extent of the two townships together with their arable and main areas of settlement. As regards the latter, the 1817 plan makes it clear that neither North nor South Bragar had a single settlement nucleus. Instead, their settlements appear to be divided between a small number of sites lying across the northern edge of the two townships. Though compiled after the townships had seemingly twice been reorganized and after their settlement had finally adjusted to a continuous linear form along the main coast road, the 1st edition of the Ordnance Survey map (1853) covering the two townships reveals that some of the settlement groups from this older layout actually carried names still familiar to residents in Bragar even today, eg Gàsig, Cràgol (illus 2). Clearly, the dispersal of settlement had meaning. For each settlement to have its own identity suggests that it was an arrangement

BRAGAR
Settlement as shown by A. Gibbs' map of Lewis, 1817

Loch
Ordais

Loch
Arnoil

South
Bragar

North
Bragar

Settlement

Arable

Rough pasture

N

1 km

ILLUS 1   Settlement at North and South Bragar (Lewis) as depicted by A Gibbs's plan of Lewis, 1817. Based on copy in map room, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. Original deposited with the Western Isles Library Service, Stornaway. Gibbs' map was based on a survey by G Chapman, 1807–9

that had organizational significance. Nearly 50 years ago, Andrew Geddes wrote a short paper on two early 18th-century rentals for Lewis, one compiled in 1718 and the other in 1726 (Geddes 1949). His paper was designed in part to correct a misunderstanding created by J R N Macphail when he edited the 1726 rental for publication (Macphail 1916). Macphail was unaware of the earlier 1718 rental. What is more, the way in which the 1718 rental was compiled raises doubts about his interpretation of the 1726 rental. Put simply, the earlier rental was more detailed. It listed tenants by township, but within each township, tenants were arranged into sub-groups. The later rental glosses these internal sub-groupings, listing

BRAGAR

——— Pre-crofting settlement

– – – First pattern of crofts

·········· Second pattern of crofts

Loch Arnoil

Cràgol

Gàsig

Cnoc Buaile
Lèob a Ghàidhil

Mille Gàradh

Fràidh

Cnoc Bhaile Loch

Loch Ordais

500 m

0

N

tenants *en masse* without any order. Unaware of what lay hidden behind the 1726 listing, Macphail assumed that the township *in toto* – ie North Bragar – to have been the unit of farming operation. Geddes rejected this interpretation. Instead, he argued that the sub-groups disclosed by the more detailed 1718 rental were the real units of farming. At one point, he calls them 'joint-farms' as if he means that they were the units around which co-operation in farming was based. But at another point, he calls them 'hamlets' as if he also saw them as settlement groupings (Geddes 1949, 58–9). It may well have been Geddes's close field knowledge of Lewis that led him to see these 'joint-farms' as settlements as well as units of tenure and co-operation, for there is no clue to their being settlements in the rental. Yet whatever his basis for supposing they were, Geddes's interpretation of the 1718 rental helps bring meaning to the cartographic and field evidence outlined in the previous paragraph.

In doing so, it raises fresh problems. Why did townships such as North and South Bragar exist if they had no meaning for everyday farming practice? Were they simply creations of fiscal assessment? A plausible explanation might be to see them as the product of a complex fissioning process, with the once unified baile of Bragar being divided into North and South Bragar and then, at a still later date, being further subdivided into a number of smaller units – yet not one that was so complete as to remove all traces of the earlier split into North and South Bragar. I contend that almost the reverse was true. The two Bragars probably began as a series of small isolated settlements. The site's significance for the debate lies in the fact that traces of these small scattered settlement are apparent on Gibbs' map, on the 1st edition of the Ordnance Survey 6-inch map (1853), and can still be easily located through field survey. The later grouping of these scattered settlements into North and South Bragar may have taken one of two paths. Either the various settlements could have been nominally grouped together into a unit called Bragar for fiscal reasons and then – at a late stage – physically reorganized into North and South Bragar in order to regulate joint control over arable or other key resources. Alternatively, they could, as a first step, have been reorganized physically into a single unit of co-operation for farming, Bragar, and then, as the settlement grew and the number of tenants increased, have been reorganized downwards, or split, into the two smaller units of North and South Bragar. In both cases, the various changes may have been initiated or facilitated by changes in the nature of tenure – perhaps a shift towards a more feudalized form of control – but even so, we can hardly describe the forces involved as compelling given the extent to which older forms had survived alongside the new.
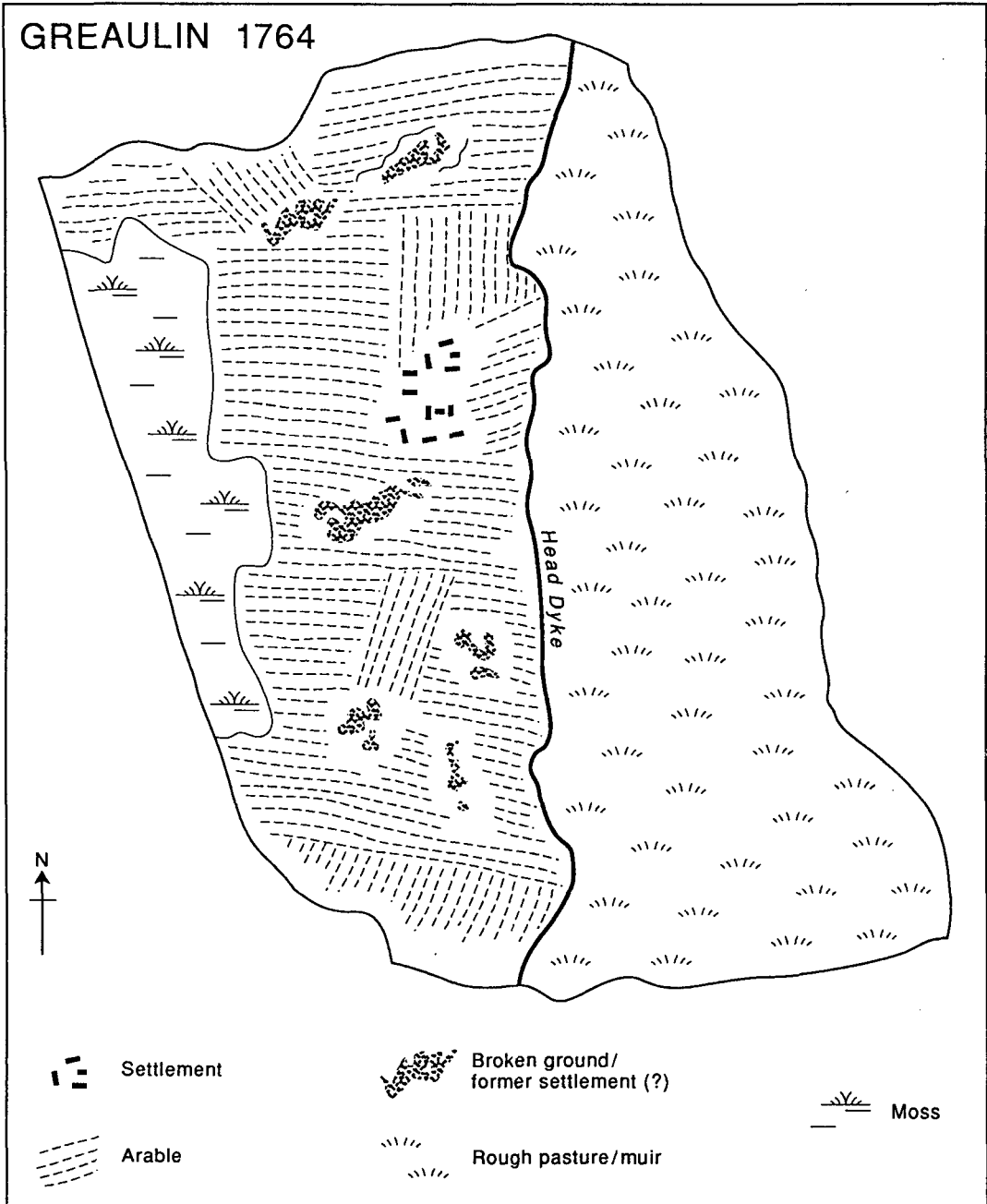
Though an attractive idea in principle, the tenant groups detailed in the 1718 rental for North and South Bragar cannot be linked in any exact way with the various settlements then existing on the ground. Indeed, field work suggests that more sites of former settlement can be located on the ground than are hinted at by the tenant groupings present in the 1718 rental or by the sites named on the 1st edition of the Ordnance Survey map or detailed on Gibbs's map. Yet even when used separately, these various sources can provide clues on the extent to

(opposite) ILLUS 2   Settlement at North and South Bragar based on the 1st edn OS 1:10560 Ross-shire, Isle of Lewis, sheet 8 (1853). Three separate systems of settlement are shown. The oldest comprises the small scattered settlement nuclei of the pre-crofting pattern, some of which were given names by the OS. The second appears to have been an early abortive attempt to lay out a system of crofts along the tracks that run roughly N/S across the S half of the arable: the houses are depicted by the OS as a series of 'ruined' houses. The third consists of what became the modern crofting settlement, a long linear pattern of housing running E/W across the S edge of the township's arable: this pattern was probably established only a few years before the OS survey in 1853.

which townships – such as those along the north-west coast of Lewis – were internally organized around a number of different settlements. The 1718 rental entry for Nether Barvas, for instance, distinguished between five separate individuals or groups (*Report to the Secretary for Scotland*, app.). Similarly, Gibbs's map of Shawbost and North Dell, also on Lewis, identifies at least three foci of settlement in each case.[16]

Elsewhere in the Hebrides, Skye is particularly rich in evidence for pre-crofting and pre-Clearance settlement. The township of Greaulin (NG 3967) in Trotternish, like many other townships on the Macdonald estate, was reorganized from a runrig township into six crofts in 1811. Soon after, these were subdivided to make 12 crofts, though by the 1850s the entire township had been cleared for sheep.[17] A plan of the area drawn up in 1764 by Mathew Stobie provides an indication of how townships such as Greaulin were arranged prior to their reorganization in 1811. At first sight, Stobie's plan of Greaulin looks straightforward, with settlement grouped around a single site at the core of the township (illus 3). This first reading, though, is wrong. In addition to identifying the main nucleus of settlement using conventional symbols for dwellings, Stobie also shaded a number of small areas lying across the arable of the township. The initial assumption was that these were probably areas of broken ground or rock outcrops. Yet when seen in relation to surviving field evidence, three of the four shaded areas lying within the township's arable sector appear as house sites for 19th-century crofts. Furthermore, each is a level though complex site with no sign of any significant amount of broken ground or rock outcrops. Stobie could not have been prompted to shade them because of local topographic conditions. Instead, I propose that Stobie – surveying the site long before crofts had appeared – marked what had been areas of settlement and which still carried the remains of wall footings, kailyards and the like. Adding weight to this interpretation is the fact that the township has former cattle tracks running down into it from the hill pasture that lies to the east. Even allowing for the distortions in Stobie's map, it is clear that one track leads to the site distinguished clearly by him as the focus of settlement c 1764 and that possibly two others appear to lead down to areas shaded by him. Logically, these cattle tracks once led to scattered pockets of dwellings and byres deep within the arable.[18] One further point deserves comment. The march or head dyke running along the eastern edge of the site does not appear to have been built as a single, coherent form. There are clear signs that it has been built in sections, each associated with a distinct set of fields, cattle tracks and former house sites. The overall impression is of a loose scatter of separate settlements which at some point have been fused together into the single nucleated form indicated on the 1764 map.

Stobie compiled maps for all parts of the Macdonald estate. His map covering Kilmuir and Uig, dated 1764, overlaps slightly in coverage with his map of the area between Portree and Uig dated 1766. If we look at townships whose coverage is duplicated by this overlap, like the cluster of townships along Glen Hinnisdal, it provides the starting point for a further analysis of how settlement may have evolved. The townships along Glen Hinnisdal appear in early rentals as the five pennyland of Glentinistle.[19] Stobie's map of 1764 shows that the five pennyland actually comprised five separate townships, each assessed as a single pennyland: Rhaagill, Balmeanech, Peinlieach, Peinhaa (also called Glentinistle) and Upper Glen (illus 4). Rhaagill was abandoned following the reorganization into crofts soon after 1811, but the remaining four townships accord with the modern farms of Balmeanach (NG 412583), Peinlich (NG 415585), Peinaha (NG 424586) and Glenuachdarach (NG 426586). As at Greaulin, five miles or so to the north, Stobie's map identifies the limits of each township together with its arable. In addition, he identifies the loci of settlement present using

GREAULIN 1764

Head Dyke

N

Settlement

Arable

Broken ground/ former settlement (?)

Rough pasture/muir

Moss

ILLUS 3   Greaulin, Skye, after the plan of the parish of Kilmuir and Uig by Mathew Stobie, 1764, SRO, RHP 5992
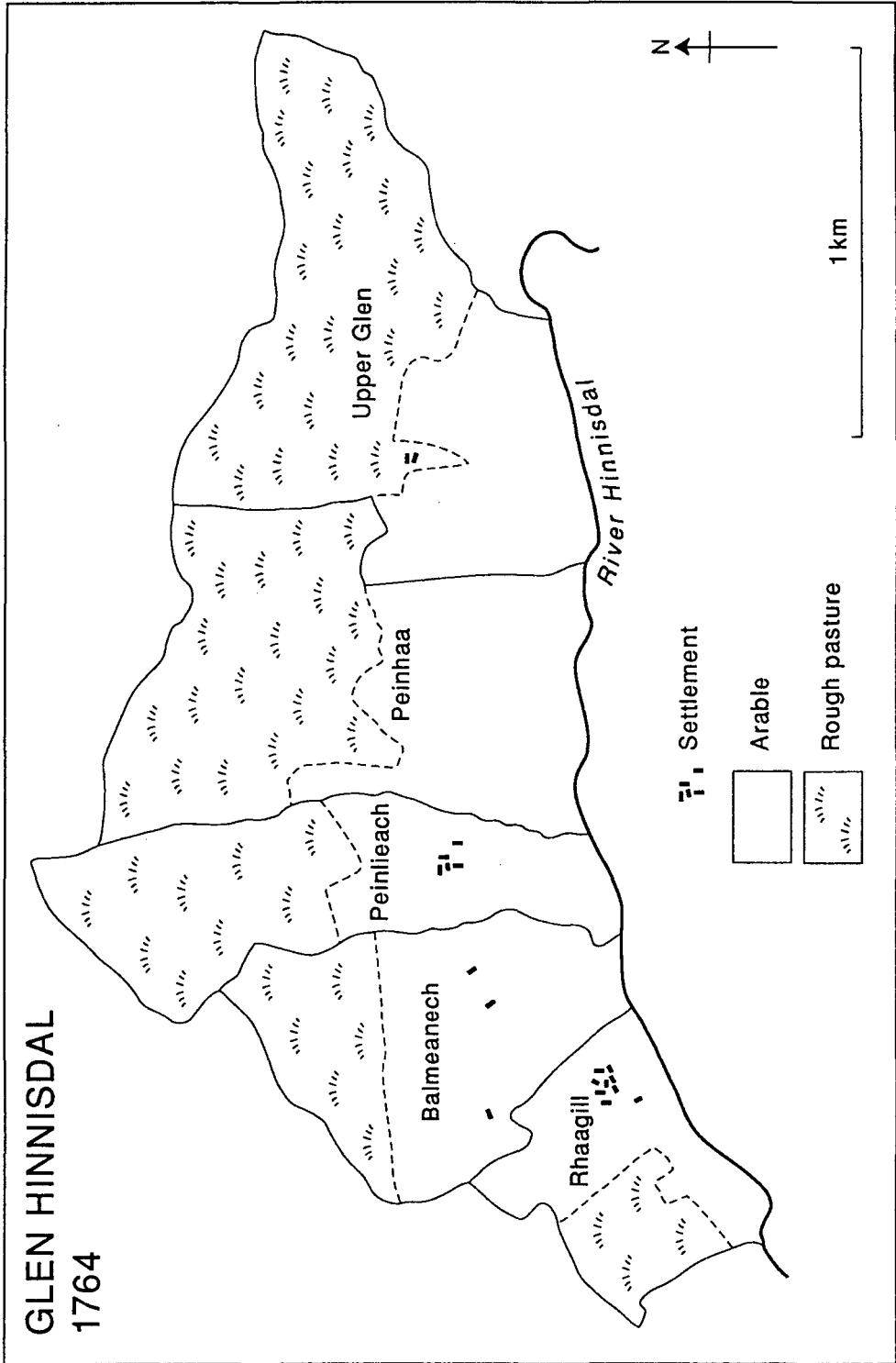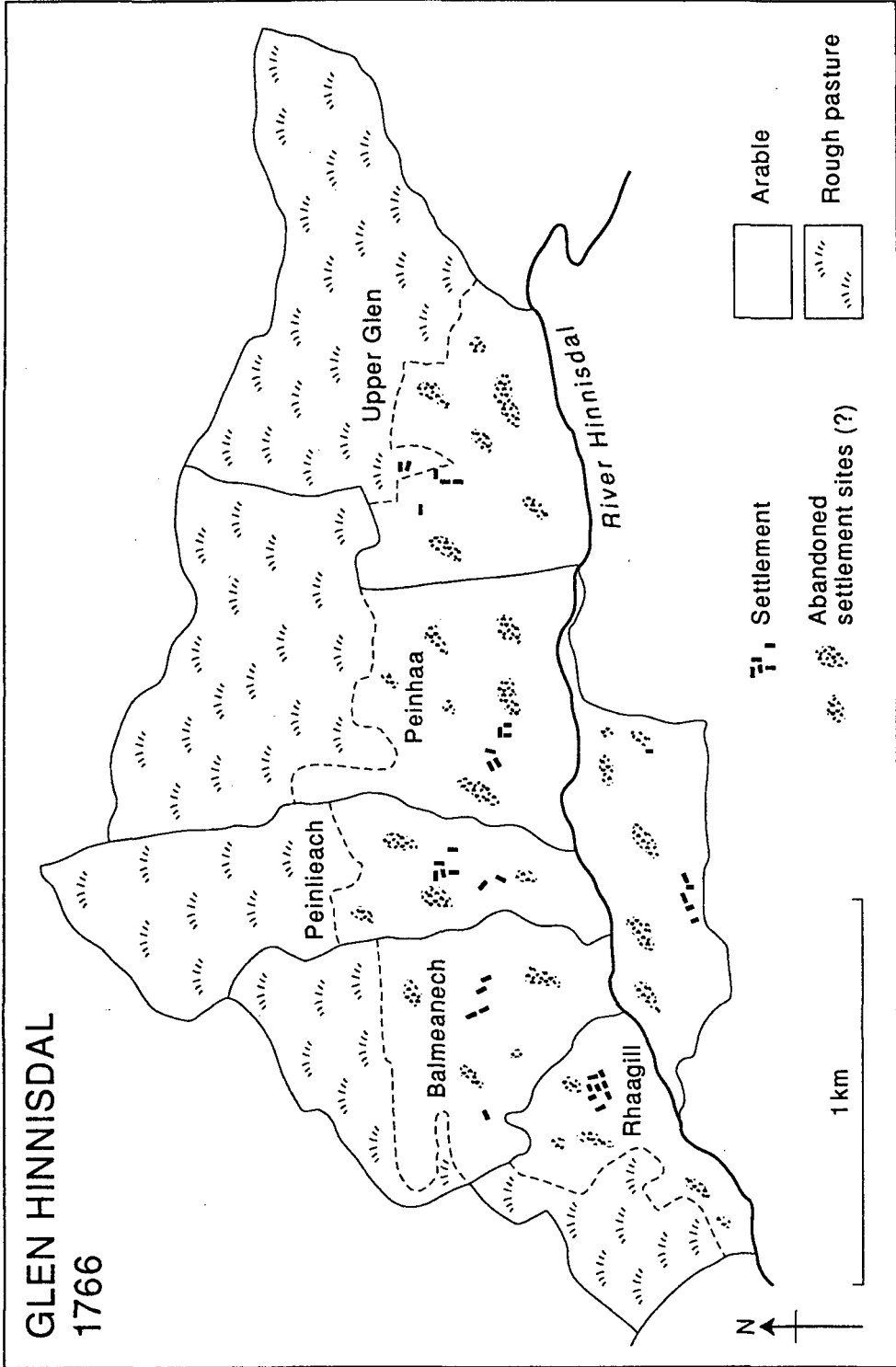
ILLUS 4 Glen Hinnisdal, Skye, after the plan of the parish of Kilmuir and Uig by Mathew Stobie, 1764, SRO, RHP 5992

conventional symbols. Except for Peinaha, which has no settlement marked, each township has a single cluster of dwellings within or on the edge of its arable (illus 4). However, in contrast to the rest of the map – from which Stobie has deliberately separated it with a straight line – this south-western corner has no patches of shading lying scattered across the various blocks of arable. It appears as a simplified portion of the map. However, when we turn to Stobie's later map of 1766 of the area between Portree and Uig, a map which again covers this south-western corner, we find he has filled in the missing detail. Arable now has numerous patches of shading lying across it (illus 5). When these shaded areas are examined using available air photography, a significant number can be linked to areas of former occupation (wall-footings, kailyards and the like).[20] Clearly, having been deliberately edited out of the 1764 map but included in the 1766 map, these patches of shading had some meaning for Stobie. The most likely explanation is that as a Lowland surveyor, Stobie was uncertain over how to treat the various abandoned wall-footings, kailyards and outbuildings, uncertain over whether they should or should not be included as relevant to the survey. Given what was said earlier about the extent to which houses may have experienced a cycle of occupation and abandonment, his uncertainty is understandable. Virtually all the townships depicted on Stobie's plan of the Snizort area have patches of shading lying beside or within arable. Where they can be compared with air photography or field evidence, then again, quite a number can be linked to areas of former housing.[21] Once this is appreciated, then Stobie's juxtaposition of a more dispersed (but abandoned) pattern of settlement with a pattern of occupied nucleated settlement hints at a chronology of change in which the former may have given way to the latter.

Between Unish and Trumpan-beg on the western side of Vaternish – located at NG 2363 – lies what is arguably one of the best-preserved of pre-crofting/pre-Clearance townships in the Hebrides. It is, however, a township whose identity is obscure. By the time the estate was surveyed in 1810, this part of the MacLeod estate had been sold to the Shaw family. The 1st edition Ordnance Survey 6-inch sheet (1878) records no settlement of any sort on the site, though later editions retrieved the situation a little by mapping a few of the fields that exist there and by noting the fact that shielings were present just outside its former head dyke.[22] Despite a fine set of 17th and 18th-century rentals for the MacLeod estate, they offer few positive clues as to the identity of the site. A strong possibility is that it was included within the 10 pennylands of Unish, or Unish and Fascich as it is sometimes called, the main settlement at the tip of Vaternish.[23] To overcome this problem of identity, the site has been called Borrafiach (illus 6) after the Iron Age broch – Dun Borrafiach – that lies on rising ground at the back of the site and whose own settlement and fields must have been a precursor for the site.

There is no way of telling from documentary data whether Borrafiach was ever a runrig township. There are clear signs of some of its fields being crossed by broad flattish rigs of the type associated with runrig, but these could equally have been the product of ploughing without any associated subdivision of holdings. Whatever their origin, what is more striking about the site is that these rigs are developed within a well-preserved network of enclosed fields (illus 6). As I have argued elsewhere, there is a strong case for saying that these enclosures – like the traces of enclosed fields to be found elsewhere in the Hebrides and along the west coast of the mainland – represent a pattern of field layout that predates runrig. Furthermore, their replacement by the latter was not something that happened in the archaic past but, arguably, during the late medieval period (ie in the 13th–15th centuries: Dodgshon 1993). As well as possessing a well-preserved pattern of enclosed fields, the site at

ILLUS 5   Glen Hinnisdal, Skye, after the plan of the parishes of Portree and Uig by Mathew Stobie, 1766, SRO, RHP 5993
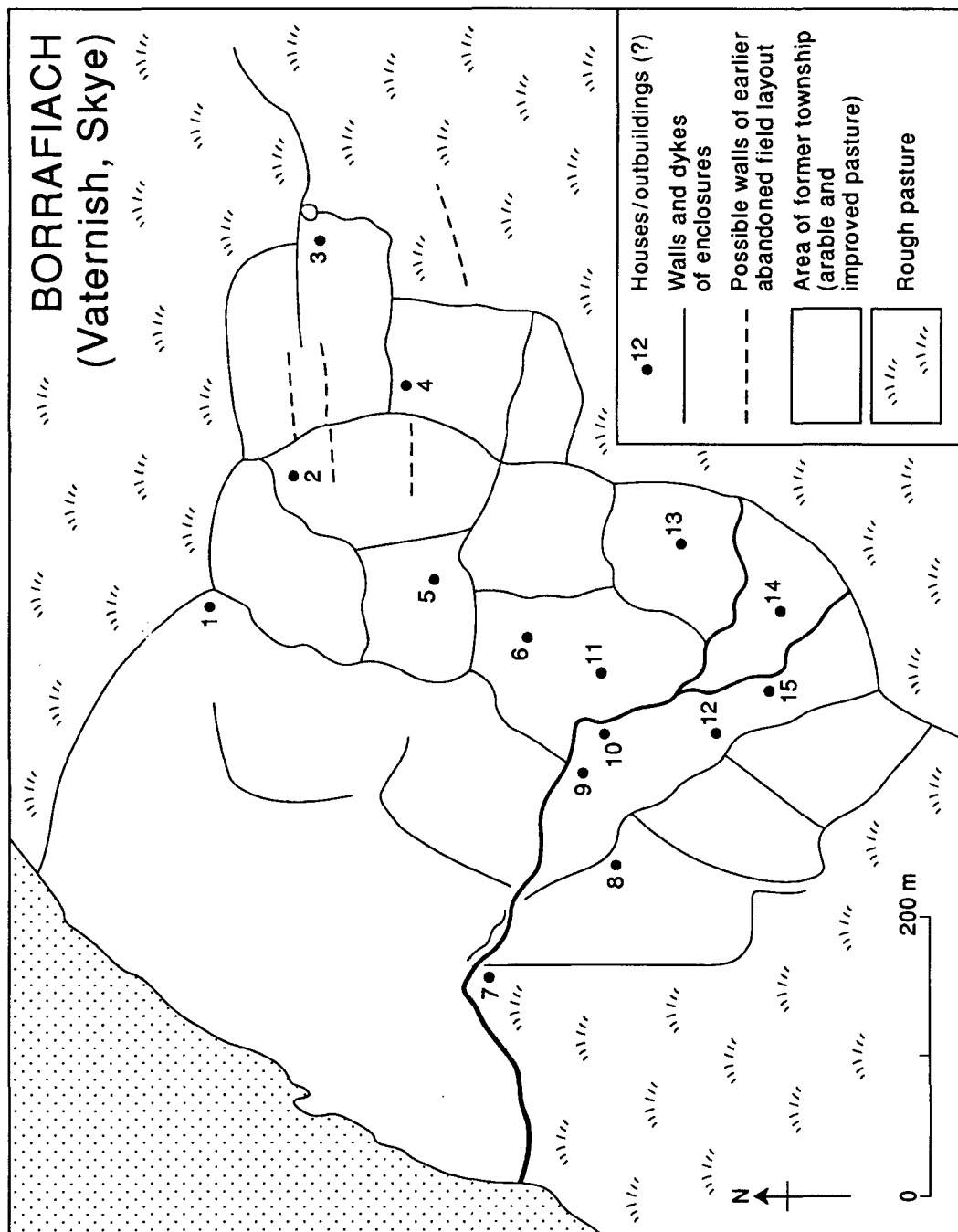
ILLUS 6   Settlement and enclosed fields at Borrafiach, Vaternish, Skye. Based on available air photography (prints no CPE/Scot/UK/175RS/4366 flown in 1946 and Jasphot/Geonex 40 88 048 flown in 1988) supplemented by the author's field notes

Borrafiach is noteworthy because it shows no signs of having possessed a nucleated settlement or baile. It is, however, not lacking in settlement. There appear to be as many as 15 different sites on which building structures of some sort may have stood. Significantly, they are scattered widely across the site (illus 6). From their size and shape, two might possibly be late 18th or early 19th-century farmsteads (nos 9 & 15). The rest appear to be either early or pre-18th-century structures, with a number clearly standing on low platforms and having all the indications of being former house sites. These figures exclude what appear to be shieling sites located on the south-eastern side of the township, outside of the head dyke. It is not suggested that all these sites were occupation sites or that they were in occupation at one and the same time. In all probability, the different sites went through cycles of use/disuse/reuse. When we combine this cycle of occupation with their general dispersal across the site, then we have what I suggest is the antithesis of stock ideas about the west Highland and Hebridean baile. Furthermore, whereas the nucleated baile is conventionally associated with runrig open fields, the dispersed settlement pattern of Borrafiach can be linked to a patttern of enclosed fields.[24]

SETTLEMENT BEFORE CROFTING: AN OVERVIEW

Drawing these various points together, a number of broad conclusions can be put forward. Given what was said in the first section about the extent to which dwellings may have been subject to regular change, we cannot regard settlement prior to crofting and the Clearances as representing a timeless, unchanging form. Whether we are dealing with stone- or wattle/turf-based dwellings, both were subject to degrees of change, with the former having its roof cover and couples removed on a regular basis, leaving only the wall-footings, and the latter being dismantled and composted as manure on an equally regular basis. The sum effect was to produce settlement forms in a continuous state of flux. Instead of seeing such settlements as having a fixed morphology, we need to see them in terms of morphogenesis, forms continuously shaped by process rather than static structural determinants.

So long as settlement prior to crofting and the Clearances fitted the stereotype of the baile or clachan – that is, so long as it was made up of a small, irregular cluster of houses, byres and kailyards – then this redefinition does not greatly affect how we see it as a settlement form. Though it changes it from a static to a dynamic form, one that has a continuous turnover in the sites that are actually being occupied, it still leaves it as an irregular, nucleated form. However, there is a case for arguing that the baile was not an archaic institution, either as a unit of settlement or landholding. When looked at more closely, there is a case for arguing that the baile literally falls apart, being underlain by a more dispersed pattern of settlement. I suggest that the sort of pattern evident at sites such as Borrafiach and Bragar illustrate the type of pattern that preceded it, with housing scattered more widely over the township, either as isolated farmsteads or in small clusters of two or three farmsteads. Not all houses would have been occupied at any one point. Not only would dwellings themselves have cycled between phases of use/disuse/reuse or construction/clearance, but occupation would – to a lesser extent – have cycled between house sites. Furthermore, this more dispersed pattern of settlement needs to be seen in relation to a pattern of landholding organized not into open fields but enclosed fields. Again, a site such as Borrafiach provides a well-preserved illustration of such fields (illus 6). Together, the dispersal of settlement across the site and the enclosed fields in which they stand hint at a wholly different pattern of landholding, one comprising small enclosed farms perhaps held in severalty.

Dating when this pattern of dispersed farmsteads and enclosed fields gave way to the nucleated baile with runrig open fields evident in 18th-century documentation must await detailed field-work on particular sites,[25] but there is a case for suggesting that it was set in motion much later than existing ideas on the baile would suppose. Like similar change elsewhere in Europe, any shift in settlement and landholding towards more aggregated or co-ordinated forms would make more sense, in terms of their root cause and means, if seen in the context of the kind of lordship that followed the slow spread of feudal ideas into the west Highlands and Islands from the late 13th century onwards (Dodgshon 1980, 66–75; Barrow 1973, 382–3). Certainly, the well-preserved state of dispersed settlements and their accompanying enclosed fields in some townships would favour a fairly late switch. Likewise, when we look at the problem of occupied settlement through 18th-century evidence, the fact that so many sites appear caught between the nucleated form of the baile and the greater dispersal of earlier forms, suggests that the switch between the two forms was a slow, incomplete affair.

Establishing the exact nature and chronology of the switch in more precise terms must be seen as an urgent task for settlement studies in the western Highlands and Islands, not least because of what it may tell us about the wider context of socio-political change in the region. Likewise, we urgently need to work out the balance between the processes of nucleation outlined in this paper and the processes of settlement splitting (eg East and West Lix, North and South Bragar) which has been outlined elsewhere (Dodgshon 1977). Though working in opposite directions, these processes are not to be seen as incompatible. Each represents a solution or response to different pressures. The fact that such contrary processes have operated serves to remind us just how complex settlement history in the region may be. Yet whatever the answer to these questions, it is clear that we can no longer treat settlement in the western Highlands and Islands as posing unique problems. Once we read its history in terms of a shift from dispersed to nucleated settlement, we are simply drawing the problem into the mainstream debate over British and north-west European settlement; this has drawn attention to the replacement of dispersed settlement with nucleated forms over the period from the 10th to the 14th centuries. If this shift appears to have occurred later and more hesitantly in the western Highlands and Islands than elsewhere, then it is only consistent with its position on the north-west edge of Europe and its delayed and diluted response to the pressures behind that shift.

NOTES

1 I have followed Crawford's recommendation (1983, 362–3) and have used the term baile in preference to clachan. However, whilst acknowledging his strictures on the use of the term clachan for all settlements rather than just for stone-based church settlements, I feel that the extensive use of the term clachan in the literature to describe all small, irregular settlements in the western Highlands and Islands and in Ireland has given it some validity as a generic rather than as a specialized term.

2 Scottish Record Office (hereafter SRO), Forfeited Estates, E788/42.

3 SRO, Forfeited Estates E741.

4 Argyll Papers, Inveraray Castle, Bundle 773, 1733 Instructions. The use of wattle for both walls and internal partitions is also evidenced in the account of James Robertson's tour through some of the western islands in 1768 (Mitchell 1898, 14). Carmichael's observations in the Outer Hebrides were based on data collected during 1883–4. He talks about wattle walls being covered with 'boulder clay' (Carmichael 1914, 46).

5   See, for example, SRO, Seaforth Papers, GD46/1/212 & /213.

6   MacLeod Papers, Dunvegan Castle, 2/32/4 & /5 Regulations between the Laird of MacLeod and his Commissioner And the Tenants and Tacksmen of his Estate 1769. Similar instructions issued in 1762/4 for Coigach encouraged tenants 'to have better and more commodious dwelling houses' but simply banned them from trying to cover 'a new or rebuilt house with Turff, Fail or Divot, But that the same shall be properly covered with Thatch, Fearn, or Heather with Tarred Rope Yarn, or covered with some better materials', see SRO, Forfeited Estates, E730/2/2.

7   SRO, AF49/2A Valuation of the Estate of Ardnamurchan and Sunart. Property of Sir James Riddell, 1807.

8   SRO, RH2/8/24 John Blackadder's Description and Valuation of Lord Macdonald's Estate of Sky and North Uist, 1799 and 1800.

9   SRO, MacKenzie Papers, GD403/20/1.

10 SRO, Forfeited Estates, E788/42, Barrisdale Estate c 1755.

11 SRO, Forfeited Estates, E741. The report for Groab stated that 'There are Six Creel houses on this farm notwithstanding they have plenty of Stone to build stone houses'.

12 SRO, GD50/135, Barony Court Book – Menzies and Rannoch, 15 June 1698.

13 SRO, Mackenzie Papers, GD403/40/1–2; MacLeod 1936, vol. 2, 163–4.

14 Examples of negotiations over the 'waytaking' of roof couples, doors and windows feature in MacLeod Papers, Dunvegan Castle, 2/32/1–5, Regulations Betweeen the Laird of MacLeod. . . The Tenants and Tacksmen of his Estate, 1769; SRO, Seaforth Papers, GD46/17/55 Volume of Papers, letter concerning Morvich/Ardentoul 1820; National Library of Scotland (hereafter NLS), Sutherland Papers 313/3326, Register for Reay Estate, 1797–1815, Tack for Borley-Uisbeg (Durness), 1807; ibid., 313/1000 Expired Leases for Assynt 1812, eg tack for Knochan, 1812; Extracts from the Court Books, 218–19 and 223. In each of the forementioned examples, the 'waytaking' of timber was seen as normal, the negotiations being a statement that the right existed or over compensation if left behind. In a 'memorandum of set' for Lewis issued 1795, the Seaforth estate issued rules or 'articles of set' for the reorganization of settlement following a proposed – but not immediately acted upon – abolition of runrig. It stipulated that each tenant should build his house on his lot 'in a straight line with the adjoining houses', that houses should be built 14 inches above the level of the surrounding ground, and that each house should 'have a separate entrance to the dwelling house distinct from that leading to the byres or other houses for cattle' so as to allow access to the dwelling apartments without passing through the byres or stable'; it was said that failure to comply with these regulations would mean that tenants would lose their right 'to remove any of the materials of their houses, nor be allowed compensation therfor' at the end of their lease. See SRO, GD46/1/276, Memorandum of Sett 1795.

15 SRO AF49/2A Valuation of the Estate of Ardnamurchan and Sunart, 1807; SRO GD5046/1/278, Articles of Set and Regulations for the Tenants of Land in Lewis, nd (probably c 1830), 'Whenever a tenant shall build a house on his lot, it shall be done in a straight line with adjoining houses'.

16 NLS, Map Room, A Gibbs, Map of Lewis, 1817. The original is kept at Stornaway Library.

17 Macdonald Papers, Armadale House, GD221/116 (old), Report Relating to the Value and Division of Lord Macdonald's Estate in Skye, made out by Mr John Blackadder, 2 December 1811. Its division into 12 lots is revealed by Macdonald Papers GD221/5904, State of Accompts 1851–2; Hull University Library, DDKG/103, Copy of Memorandum, and Report for James Brown Esq. Trustee on the Estate of the Rt. Hon Godfrey William Wentworth Lord Macdonald on His Lordship's Property of Macdonald and Strath, Isle of Skye, 1851. Its clearance in the 1850s is documented by evidence presented to Report of the Commission of Inquiry, 121.

18 Regulations issued for Skye in 1788 declared that 'to all Farms or rooms of land there shall be a common path with a gate on the march dyke properly slung with a heather rope', SRO, Mackenzie Papers, GD403/40/1–2.

19 Macdonald Papers, Armadale House, GD221/5789, Rental of Macdonald Estate, 1733.

20 Two sets of air photography were used: CPE/Scot/UK/175FP/1327, flown in 1946, and part of a Jasphoto/Geonex survey carried out in 1988, print no 40 88 060. Copies of both are archived with

the Air Photographs Unit, formerly of the Scottish Office, now with the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, Edinburgh.

21 The coastal areas west of Glen Hinnisdal provide fine examples.

22 The modern 1:25000 maps show a small cluster of fields but not the total pattern.

23 MacLeod Papers, Dunvegan Castle, 2/493/1, Judicial Rental of the Baronnie of Vaternish, 30 July 1724; 2/493/8, Rental of the Barony of Waternish, 1754; 2/485/53, Rental of the Estate of MacLeod, 1689.

24 Since the author carried out work on the site at Borrafiach, 1990–1, the Royal Commission has carried out a detailed survey of the Vaternish Peninsula in advance of plans for partial afforestation. Published plans from the survey reveal the extent to which other former township areas, such as Unish, are criss-crossed by enclosures. It also shows the complexity of settlement traces in large townships such as Halistra (see Dixon 1993, 26–32.)

25 It is hoped that further detailed work, including the dating of dykes, will be carried out at sites on Skye.

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