

Artificial platforms of possible Iron Age or Dark Age date on Dùn Mór, Dornie, Skye & Lochalsh

Tim Neighbour*

with contributions by M Cressey, A Clarke & G Warren

ABSTRACT

Topographical survey and trial excavations were carried out on a tree-covered ridge, known as Dùn Mór, near Dornie, between February and April 1997. A number of artificially enhanced platforms were discovered at different levels on the ridge; these had been created by connecting bedrock outcrops with retaining walls. Walls delimit access to the ridge from the south-east, where there is an isolated platform. A well defined pathway, enhanced in two places by retaining walls, dog-legs up the southern side of the ridge from the edge of Loch Duich. An oval cairn, covering a 'grave-shaped' hole, was discovered on one platform. Worked quartz, modern pottery, glass and iron objects were found in the dumped material behind the walls. While radiocarbon dates from two securely sealed deposits are consistent with the interpretation of Dùn Mór as an Iron Age or Dark Age fortified ridge site, its morphology is slightly different from most well-known examples. The work was funded by Highland Council.

INTRODUCTION

In early 1997, a previously unrecorded series of artificial platforms was identified by local amateur archaeologists at Dùn Mór near Dornie, where remedial works were being undertaken on a hillslope following a landslip adjacent to the A87 trunk road. The site was reported to Highland Council Archaeology Service.

In order to stabilize the land the destruction of the western edge of the site was required. Evenly spaced, near-vertical holes were to be drilled and packed with explosives along the so called pre-split line on the top of the hillside and drill-holes in the southern cliff face similarly packed with explosive. The charges along the pre-split line were to be set off milliseconds before those in the cliff face, thus minimizing the travel of shock waves into the portion of the hillside destined to remain untouched.

A programme of topographical survey and trial excavations was carried out by the Centre for Field Archaeology (CFA) between February and April 1997 in advance of the blasting. The work on site was undertaken in three phases: survey of all visible remains; excavation in advance of the construction of an access track for machines to reach the cliff face from the north; and a watching brief during the construction of the access track.

* CFA Archaeology Ltd, Archibald Hope House, Eskmills, Musselburgh, East Lothian EH21 7PQ

The western edge of the ridge was successfully demolished in mid-May 1997 and no visible damage was caused to the rest of the site.

LOCATION

Dùn Mór is a tree-covered ridge of undifferentiated gneiss which runs roughly NW/SE, c 70 m from the east shore of Loch Duich (NGR: NG 887 253). A number of artificially enhanced platforms on the ridge lie between 40 m and 56 m OD. A small knoll at the northern end of the ridge forms its highest part and affords spectacular views to Eilean Donan Castle and up Loch Alsh to the west as far as the Skye Bridge.

Part of the western edge of the ridge had been demolished during the construction of the A87 (illus 1). However, the southern portion of the ridge had apparently remained unaltered at the time of the evaluation, as a path that dog-legged down the south-western flank was probably contemporary with the platforms on the ridge.

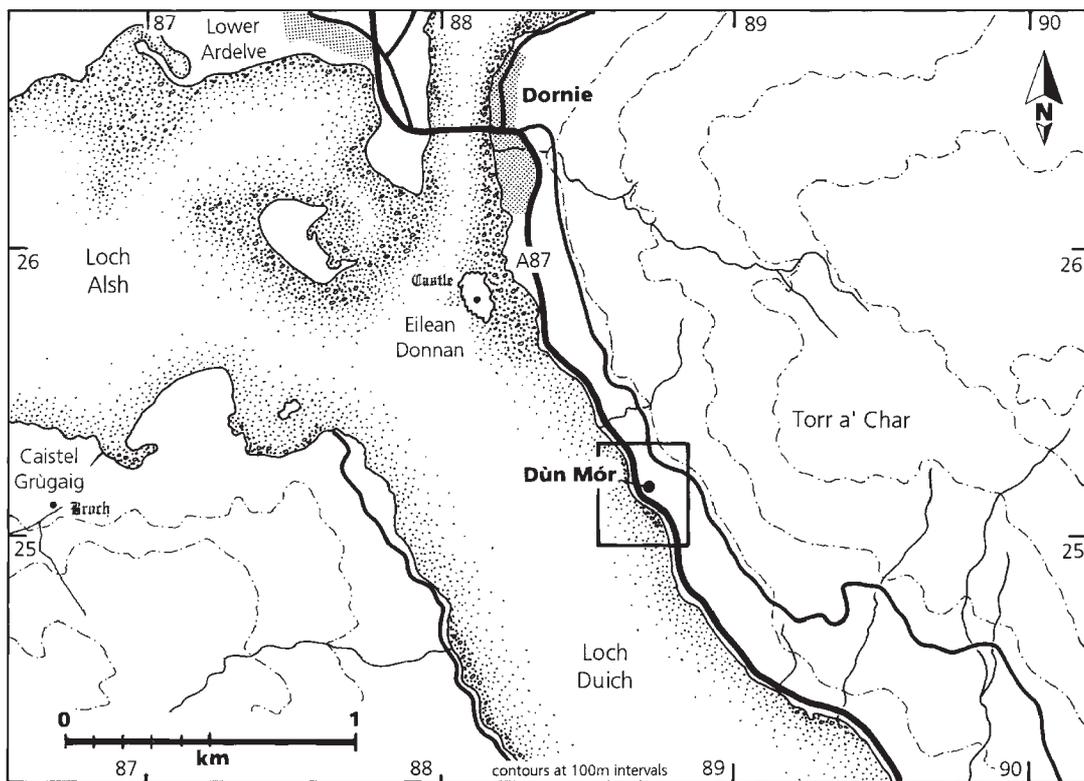
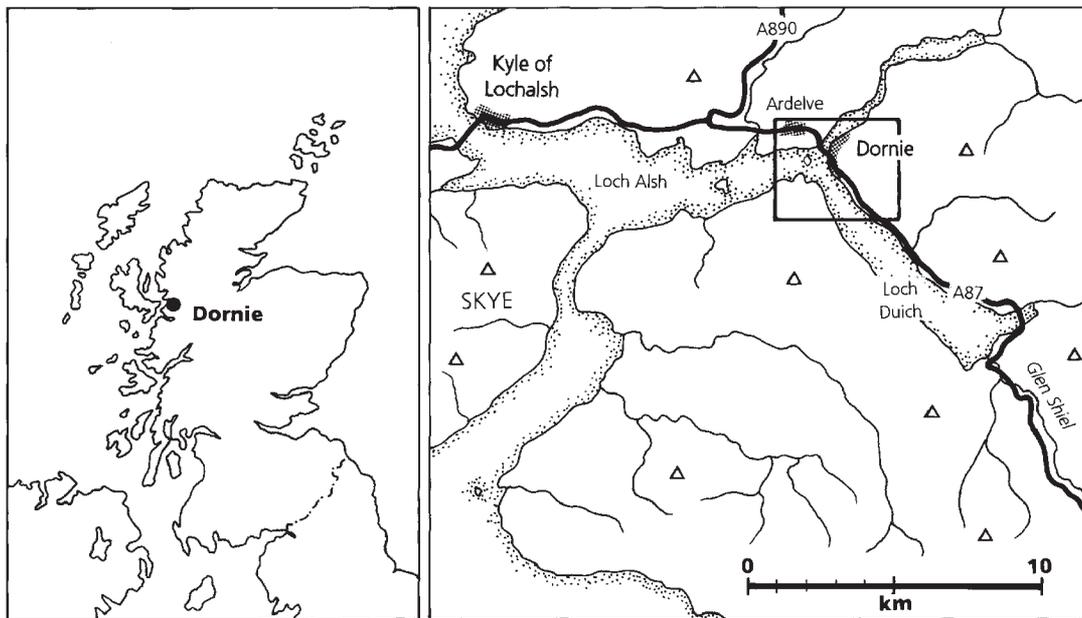
CARTOGRAPHIC AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There was some confusion about the name of this site. During the evaluation, the ridge was known as Dun Davie (Neighbour 1997a & b). However, no reference to the ridge ever being known as Dun Davie could be found in written sources or from local historical knowledge (B Ramsey, pers comm). An examination of the cartographic sources shows that the only two place-names in the vicinity are Dùn Mór and Dùn Beag. Dùn Mór is a common Gaelic place-name which means either the 'large fort' (Watson 1926, 92) or 'big hill' (Johnston 1892, 165). Dùn Mór, Dornie, lies just to the south of Dùn Beag (small fort or hill). These names are recorded on the first edition Ordnance Survey map, surveyed in 1875 (OS 1880). It is not entirely clear which topographical features the two names apply to and the position of the text of the two names is not consistent from one map edition to the next. Nevertheless, Dùn Mór has been used for the entry in *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland 1997* (Neighbour 1998) and its use is retained here. Neither name is now used locally (B Neath & B Ramsay, pers comm) and the site is more easily located in relation to a house, named 'Culag' (illus 2), c 50 m to the north-east (NGR: NG 887 253). The house is not present on the 1:25,000 Ordnance Survey Pathfinder map (no 205), published in 1991, but can be found on the 1:50,000 Ordnance Survey Landranger map (no 33), published in 1996.

Dùn Mór lies within Kintail parish and formed part of the Inverinate estate, which belonged to the Seaforth MacKenzies from around the 13th century, until they parted with it in the 19th century. No record of the site has been found on any of the MacKenzie estate plans or maps (Brown 1795: Cuming 1810) and no reference is made to anything which resembles the site in the *Statistical Account of Scotland* for either 1792 (Morison 1792) or 1836 (Morison 1836).

THE SURVEY

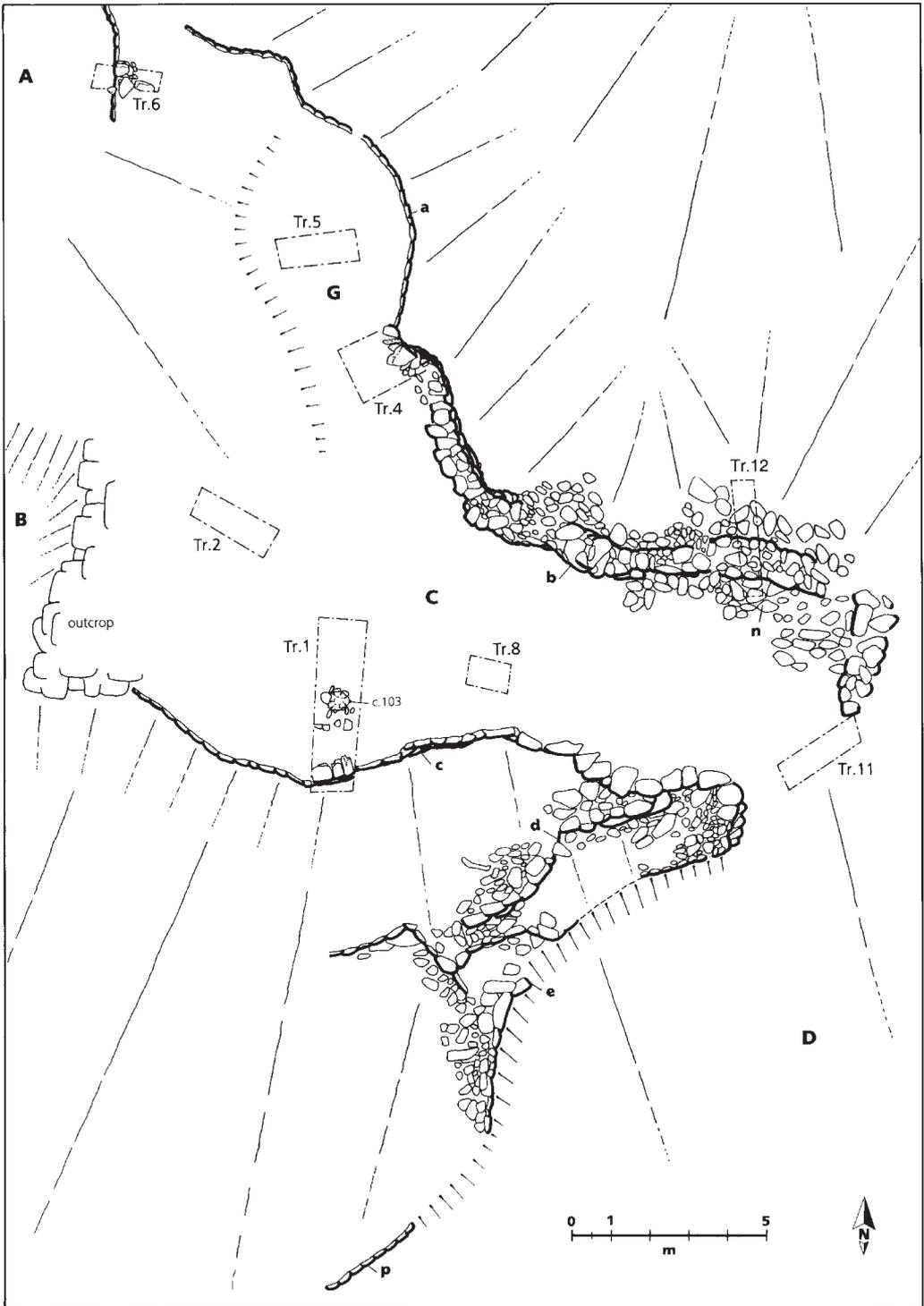
The results of the survey are presented in illus 2 and 3 and are described below. Features have been given unique identifiers in the following manner: large, natural features that have been artificially enhanced, paths and a cairn are assigned capital letter identifiers; walls are identified in lower case letters.



ILLUS 1 Site location map, showing views down Loch Alsh and Loch Duich (Based upon the Ordnance Survey map © Crown copyright)



ILLUS 2 Plan of principal features and trial trench locations



ILLUS 3 Detailed plan of Platform C

PLATFORMS

Five enhanced platforms were recorded (A, C, D, E & G). The northernmost (A) was located on the very top of the knoll that forms the highest point on the ridge. Originally thought to be featureless, excavation of Trench 6 revealed a low wall (*m*) around the east edge of the platform. To the immediate south of platform A lies the most clearly enhanced platform (C). Two substantial, roughly coursed walls (*b* & *c*) retain dumped topsoil and stones, which together form the level platform. Rubble (*n*), presumed to be from the northern of the two walls (*b*), was also recorded. The walls (*b* & *c*) continue to the south-east to line a natural route from platform D. An annexe (G) to platform C is defined by an outcrop of bedrock rising up to the knoll (A) on the western side and a very crudely constructed retaining wall (*a*) on the east. Platform D is largely a natural formation, defined by a ridge to the east and outcropping bedrock to the south and west. A section of wall fills a gap in bedrock on the south side (*g*, illus 4), and a further low revetting wall (*p*) is located on the north-west side, near the western corner of the platform. Two walls (*d* & *e*), built on the slope separating platform D from platform C to the north restrict access to platform C from platform D to a passage c 4 m wide as detailed above.

A further platform (E) is located at the south of a ridge (F), to the east of platform D. No retaining walls are involved in its construction, but part of the ridge at the north-western side has been removed to increase the available level area.

The ridge (F) is enhanced along part of its length by roughly coursed walling (*h*) facing north-east. A wall (*f*) at the northern end of the ridge continues the line of the eastern retaining wall (*b*) of platform C.

PATHS

A path (J), leading from the road, dog-legs up the steep southern slopes of the ridge. In two places the natural terrain has been enhanced by the construction of retaining walls (*j* & *k*). A narrow path (H) runs below the western edge of platform D. This path does not convincingly connect with the upper platforms (C & D) and it is probable that it provided access to further platforms to the south and west which were removed during the construction of the present A87. It is far more likely that the original route (K) to platform D led from the lower path (J) below the western edge of the ridge (F).

OTHER FEATURES

A natural cleft in bedrock (B), to the west of platform C, ended in a high, sheer slope to the west and consequently did not provide a natural access route.

A low, oval cairn (L) was discovered on platform D beneath vegetation. Trench 9 was excavated over this feature.

EXCAVATION

Fifteen trial trenches were excavated on platforms A, C, D and G and in the cleft in bedrock (B). The results of excavation are summarized from highest platform to lowest. Context numbers are combined with letters assigned during the survey where appropriate. Trench sizes varied between 1 m by 1 m and 6 m by 2 m.

PLATFORM A (ILLUS 3)

Trench 6 was excavated on the highest point of the ridge on its east side and revealed a low wall, c 1 m thick, two courses high (*m*), which presumably ran around the summit. This wall has a well defined inner face and no clear outer face. It is possible that the outer face has collapsed. No finds were recovered from this trench.

CLEFT B (ILLUS 2 & 3)

Trench 3 excavated in a cleft, revealed a quantity of fractured bedrock, presumed to be of natural origin, and no archaeological features. Seven worked quartz flakes were recovered from topsoil.

PLATFORM C (ILLUS 3)

Trench 2 was excavated in the middle of the platform (C). This revealed a very rooty topsoil above disintegrating bedrock forming subsoil. No archaeological features were present.

Trench 1 was excavated at the southern edge of platform C in order to detect structural remains. The western retaining wall (102, *c*) was uncovered and proved to be a single skin, roughly coursed wall, c 0.5 m broad and 0.5 m high. Three courses of the wall survived. The fill behind the wall consisted of topsoil (101) and redeposited angular bedrock rubbles (105). A hollow in the natural bedrock was filled with charcoal-rich soil (103) and well sealed by the rubble (105). Six worked quartz flakes, two sherds of modern porcelain and a crescent-shaped iron object were recovered from the topsoil (101).

Trench 8 was excavated to assess the structural significance of two angular stones (802) projecting through the turf on platform C. They proved to be without structural association and lay entirely within topsoil.

Trench 12 was excavated to provide a section through wall *b* and rubble *n*. It was demonstrated that wall *b* is faced on both sides at this point and constructed of roughly coursed stones, surviving to three courses height. It is c 0.9 m wide and up to 0.7 m high. The rubble (1201, *n*) is most likely to have resulted from the collapse of the wall, which effectively continues the natural barrier provided by the western side of ridge F to the south. The wall retains the soil which forms platform C. A layer of small and medium angular stones (1205), could have been formed during the walls construction or collapse or may have been deliberately laid to provide a firm surface. The layer of stones (1205) overlay subsoil (1206). Concentrations of charcoal within the subsoil (1206) indicates that some of this layer had been redeposited or trampled, but no clear division was visible. The charcoal must have been deposited before the deposition of the angular rubble (1205).

Trench 11 was excavated across the gap between platforms C and D. Topsoil with abundant roots directly above subsoil was revealed. No gate features were discovered. Twelve worked quartz flakes and two sherds of modern pottery were recovered.

Trench 15 was positioned over the walls (*d* & *e*) between platforms C and D. The main work undertaken in this trench was the removal of moss and vegetation, so as to reveal the walls. Topsoil was also removed. The topsoil had been homogenized by the action of tree roots. Forty worked quartz flakes and a sherd of modern pottery were recovered from this trench. The edges of this irregular trench are defined by the extent of walls *d* and *e* (illus 3); formal trench edges are not shown.



ILLUS 4 Retaining wall (g), from the south (scale rod divisions at 0.2 m intervals)

PLATFORM G (ILLUS 3)

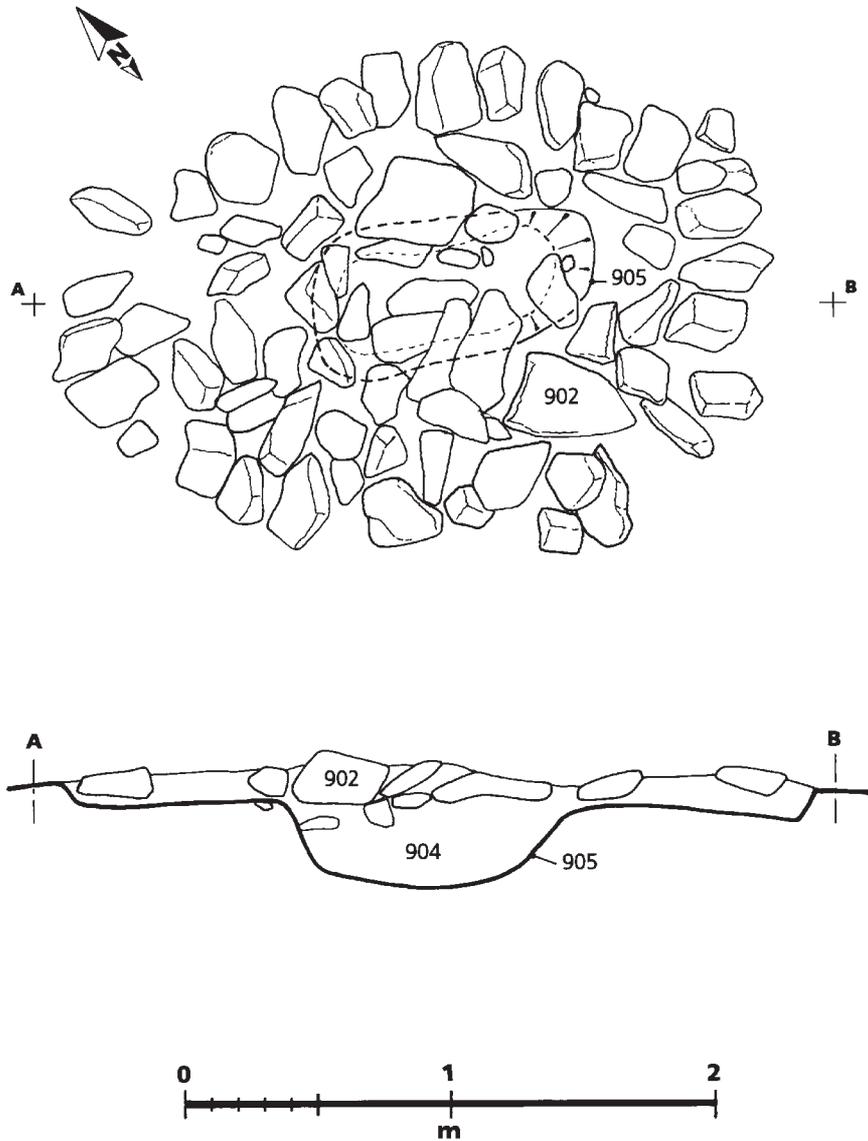
Trench 5 was excavated on platform G. Topsoil and rubble were recorded behind the unexcavated retaining wall (a). Finds consisted of a water-rounded, faceted stone and two sherds of modern pottery.

Trench 4 was excavated on platform G, to the east of platform C. The junction of two styles of retaining wall (a & b) was examined. Excavation suggested that the two walls (a & b) were probably contemporary, the differences in construction and height being a response to different needs: the retaining wall is, of necessity, higher to the south than to the north in order to create a level platform. The change in construction style of wall b from a single skin retaining wall in Trench 4 to a free-standing, double-skinned construction in Trench 12 is a response to the nature of the topography. Twelve worked quartz flakes were recovered from the rooty soil (401), which was retained behind the wall.

PLATFORM D (ILLUS 2, 4 & 5)

Trench 7 was excavated on platform D behind the retaining wall (g) on its southern side. The wall (g) was revealed as a single-skin, roughly coursed, south-facing construction retaining topsoil. Two flaked quartz fragments were recovered from the retained soil.

Trench 9 was placed over a moss-covered oval arrangement of stones (L) in the middle of platform D (illus 5). This low cairn measured c 3 m NW/SE by c 2 m transversely and had a maximum height of c 0.2 m. The stones (902) were generally angular. The stones slumped into a pit (905) beneath the centre of the oval. The pit measured c 1.0 m by 0.6 m and was c 0.35 m deep. Although quite small, the possibility that this



ILLUS 5 Trench 9: the low, oval cairn (L) on Platform D

feature was an inhumation, covered by a low cairn cannot be ruled out. The absence of skeletal material could be explained by the acid nature of the soil. Four worked quartz flakes were recovered from topsoil in this trench. No finds were recovered from the pit.

PATH H (ILLUS 2)

Trench 10 was excavated across path H, to the north of wall *q*. Wall *q* was revealed as a single-skin, rough-coursed, south-facing retaining wall over 1 m high and c 0.3 m wide. The material behind the wall, which formed the pathway, had been homogenized by root action. Seven worked quartz flakes and nine sherds of modern pottery were recovered from the homogenized soil behind the wall.

PATH J (ILLUS 2)

Trench 13 was excavated behind wall *j* on the path (J) that dog-legs up the ridge. Small, angular gravel was present within the topsoil retained by the wall (*j*). It is possible that these stones were laid deliberately to consolidate the path.

Trench 14 was excavated behind the retaining wall (*k*) at the foot of the path (J), just to the north of the present A87. As in Trench 13, small, angular gravel was present within the topsoil retained by the wall (*k*) and was presumably laid for a similar reason.

FINDS

The finds assemblage comprised worked and unworked quartz flakes; a faceted pebble and modern pottery, glass and iron. All of the finds were recovered from either topsoil or the deliberate infill associated with the construction of the platforms and none was securely sealed. As a consequence the finds can only tenuously be linked with the suite of walls and platforms. It is noteworthy that none of the artefacts, including those of obvious antiquity (the quartz assemblage and faceted pebble), was recovered from the securely sealed contexts from which the radiocarbon samples were retrieved. This could imply that all of the artefacts were deposited after the walls were constructed and their presence in topsoil or deliberate infilling is due to bioturbation. Nevertheless, if the dumped material behind the walls was derived from the ridge, the presence of worked quartz suggests prehistoric use of the site.

CHIPPED STONE

Graeme Warren

A total of 95 quartz flakes was recovered. Of these three are natural pebbles, and the remaining 92 are either clearly worked ($n=66$) or probably worked ($n=26$). All of the quartz finds came from topsoil, and were stratigraphically indistinguishable from finds of recent ceramics, glass and iron. Analysis of the material suggests that there is little differentiation between the finds from the varied trenches and the assemblage is therefore treated as a unit in the analysis that follows.

The difficulties of analysing quartz industries are well recognized. Due to its relatively irregular and coarse crystalline structure quartz fractures in a less predictable fashion than more homogenous silica minerals such as flint or chert (Andrefsky 1998; Whittaker 1994). Consequently signatures of stone-crafting (such as bulbs of percussion, ripple scars and coherent morphology) are underdeveloped and it is not always possible to be completely confident of the human origin of a quartz 'artefact' (see Bradley 1995 for one approach to this problem). Because of these difficulties a category of 'probably worked' has been retained in this analysis.

Description

The material recovered from Dùn Mór is dominated by chunks and 'cores' (Table 1). Many of the 'cores' are highly irregular split pebbles and 11 are clear bipolar examples. The cores varied greatly in size, probably reflecting the availability of local raw materials. Irregular cores ranged from 22 mm to 120 mm in maximum dimensions and bipolar cores from 29 mm to 56 mm. Flakes and chunks ranged from 7 mm to 45 mm and are broadly coherent in size and morphology with the cores. A very few fine regular flakes are present alongside a number of serviceable regular

flakes, but the difficulties of classification are clearly demonstrated by a number of ‘cores’ or ‘chunks’ which retain useful cutting edges.

TABLE 1

Chipped stone

Type	Probable	Definite
Flake (Regular)	0	10
Flake (Irregular)	7	12
Core	4	25
Chunk	15	19

A small proportion of the material present was abraded or lightly rolled ($n = 15$) and a few ($n = 19$) may have been broken. Considering that abraded or broken material was evenly distributed over the site and the generally consistent character of the assemblage, there seems little reason to suppose that the bulk of the material has moved very far from its place of origin. The presence of abraded material is interesting, perhaps suggesting some degree of chronological complexity within the assemblage, but it is hard to assess the significance of this factor.

Discussion

In general, the indications are of a broadly expedient industry including various ways of splitting small to medium quartz pebbles. These techniques included one distinctive approach to obtaining flakes from a particular class of raw material. A range of flakes, chunks and cores, any of which may have had serviceable functional edges, was an outcome of this. None of the artefacts recovered offers any indication of date beyond the fact that they are prehistoric. It is certainly possible that the industry is of Bronze Age/Iron Age date, coherent with the faceted cobble discovered in Trench 5. Expedient quartz working was relatively common at this time, but this association is far from indisputable. Neither is the function of the industry clear. The assemblage from Dùn Mór, then, is an indication of some kind of prehistoric activity taking place on site, but, unfortunately, little more than that.

A full account of the chipped stone assemblage, including a catalogue, has been archived with the data structure report (Warren 1997).

COARSE STONE

Ann Clarke

A faceted cobble was recovered from the topsoil in Trench 5 on Platform G. This worn cobble has smooth, ridged, facets worked on one end and a rougher facet on the opposite end. The addition of a smoothed face is a common feature to these tools which are commonly termed pounder/grinders. This tool bears all the diagnostic features of this type and is towards the smaller end of the size range. Pounder/grinders are common to Bronze Age and Iron Age settlement sites all over Scotland and are therefore difficult to use for accurate dating; however, its small size and the presence of smooth, ridged facets may tentatively date its use to the Bronze Age or Early Iron Age.

Description Sub oval water-worn cobble of fine-grained rock, slightly abraded/weathered through exposure. The broad end has two finely ground facets which form a ridge. On the opposite end the facet is more roughly pecked. One face has been worn quite smooth. L 108 mm; W 92 mm; Th 62 mm

POTTERY, GLASS AND METALWORK

Modern finds were recovered from the topsoil in all of the excavated trenches and included 22 sherds of pottery and porcelain, a shard of glass, the base of a small cylindrical glass vessel and three iron objects. These objects all date to the 19th and 20th centuries.

CARBONIZED PLANT MACROFOSSILS

Michael Cressey

Carbonized material from three contexts was examined: pit fill (904) beneath cairn L; a hollow (103) behind wall *c*; and rubble (1205) next to wall *b*. Charcoal had previously been sieved and split into 2 mm and 4 mm fractions. Carbonized seeds were sorted into cereal and ‘carbonized seeds’ during post-excavation work.

Identifications were made using a binocular microscope at magnifications ranging between x10 and x200. Generally identifications were carried out on transverse cross-sections on charcoal measuring 4–6 mm. Anatomical keys listed in Schweingrüber (1990), in-house reference charcoal and slide mounted micro-sections were used to aid identifications. Asymmetry and morphological characteristics were recorded. Roundwood (RW) is used as a term of reference for branch wood and non-timber (squared-off or blocky) material.

Charcoal sample volumes were low throughout the three contexts (< 3 g). The results of the assessment are shown in Table 2 and described below.

Context 103 contained the species *Corylus avellana*, *Pinus sylvestris*, *Betula* sp. and *Alnus glutinosa*. A single fragment of *Corylus* nut shells was also present. Other plant macrofossils were low in frequency, confined to three undifferentiated cereal grains and other ‘weed’ type seeds.

Context 1205 contained charcoal that was exclusively *Quercus* sp and derived from timber (2.8 g). One fragment of *Corylus* nut shell (0.01 g) and other, undifferentiated carbonized seeds (<0.05 g) were also present.

Context 904 contained *Corylus* nut shell (4 frags) and poorly preserved seeds.

TABLE 2

Sample list and species identifications

Context no	Species	Weight g	No of IDs	Preservation	Form
103	<i>Corylus av</i>	1.9	12	very good	RW
103	<i>Pinus sylv</i>	1.23	13	very good	RW
103	<i>Betula</i> sp	0.3	2	very good	RW
103	<i>Alnus gl</i>	0.5	3	very good	RW
103	<i>Corylus</i> nut	0.05	1	very good	n/a
103	cereal undiff	n/a	3 grains	very good	n/a
103	small seeds	n/a	n/a	very good	n/a
1205	<i>Quercus</i>	2.8	10	good	Timber
1205	<i>Corylus</i> nut	0.017	1	very good	n/a
1205	seeds	<0.05	n/a	very good	n/a
904	<i>Corylus</i> nuts	<0.5	4	very good	n/a
904	seeds	<0.05	n/a	poor	n/a

RADIOCARBON DATES

Two radiocarbon dates were obtained from samples of *Corylus* nut shells from two excavated contexts (Table 3). The two contexts were chosen as the most securely sealed deposits discovered during the excavations that contained datable material and were probably associated with the construction and collapse of the platforms.

The samples were prepared by the Scottish Universities Research and Reactor Centre (SURRC) and then dated by the University of Arizona AMS facility. Dates in Table 3 were calibrated using the OxCal 3beta 2, 1998 program (Stuiver & Kra 1986).

TABLE 3

Dùn Mór radiocarbon dates: all dates calibrated using OxCal 3beta2, 1998 (Stuiver & Kra 1986)

Lab no	Context no	Species	BP	1 σ cal date range	2 σ cal date range	$\delta^{13}\text{C}$ (‰)
AA-30682	103	<i>Corylus</i> nut	2525 \pm 55	800–540 BC	810–410 BC	-24.2
AA-30683	1205	<i>Corylus</i> nut	1620 \pm 55	AD 380–540	AD 250–560	-24.9

Taphonomy

Platform C The single dated sample (AA-30682) comprised a fragment of nut shell from the fill of a hollow (103) sealed beneath stone rubble retained behind the retaining wall (*c*). The date should provide a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the platform (and hence possibly for the whole site). Of course, the nut shell fragment may be residual and consequently the radiocarbon date need not closely reflect the date of construction of the retaining wall, but will pre-date it.

Rubble *n* The single dated sample (AA-30683) was a nut shell fragment from soil (1206) buried beneath angular rubble (*n*, 1205) next to wall *b* (1204). The date provides a *terminus post quem* for the deposition of the rubble, which may have occurred by a number of processes: as debris from the construction of the wall; laid to provide a firm surface during construction of the wall or afterwards; as debris from the collapse of the wall. This latter case represents the latest possible depositional process. Thus, the *terminus post quem* for the deposition of the rubble provides a *terminus post quem* for the collapse of the wall.

Analysis

Do these dates provide reliable information about the development of the site? The earliest date falls mainly in the approximate period 750–400 cal BC, one of the ‘disaster areas’ in the calibration curve (Baillie & Pilcher 1983, 58–60): the particularly wide calibrated range for dates in this period is a drawback which currently hinders attempts to date the Early Iron Age by radiocarbon methods. Nevertheless, the radiocarbon dates provide *termini post quem* for two key events in the history of the site which form an important element in the discussion of the site’s likely function. These events, which derive from the discussion of the taphonomy of the dated samples provided above, can be summarized as:

- 1 Platform C was formed at some point during or after the date range 810–410 cal BC. It is probable that this hypothesis extends to the construction of the entire series of platforms.
- 2 Rubble from wall *b* was deposited at some point during or after the date range cal AD 250–560. Whether the rubble was formed during the construction of the wall or derived from its collapse (which seems more likely), this provides a date after which the collapse of the wall occurred. It is not possible to extend this information to provide an earliest possible date at which the whole series of platforms fell into disrepair.

Obviously, these dates do not exclude the possibility that the site was constructed, used and collapsed at a later date. However, the absence of any mention of the site in estate records or maps suggest that it had fallen out of use before the beginning of the 19th century. It does not seem outlandish to assume that the two radiocarbon dates reflect the date of the site's construction and its primary use: an assumption supported by the presence of artefacts of obvious antiquity (the faceted pebble and worked quartz).

DISCUSSION

The revetted platforms at Dùn Mór cannot be easily assigned to a particular date or class of site. Interpretation of the site has to be based upon a consideration of the site morphology, location and the limited dating evidence.

MORPHOLOGY

The site consists of a series of artificial platforms at different levels on a ridge. Construction of the A87 had entailed the destruction of part of the western side of the ridge which may have supported further platforms. The total surviving area of the ridge with artificial platforms is c 0.3 ha and the total level area provided by the platforms is c 0.07 ha. The summit, at the northern end of the ridge, is sub-circular, with a diameter of c 6 m. The platforms have been created by connecting bedrock outcrops with retaining walls (see illus 4 for a typical example). Rubble and soil dumped behind the walls served to build up a level ground surface. Walls delimited access from the south-east, where there is an isolated platform. A well-defined pathway, enhanced in two places by retaining walls, dog-legged up the southern side of the site to the platforms. It is probable that this path originally led from the edge of Loch Duich.

The construction of stretches of wall to close gaps in bedrock is an eminently practical method for creating artificial platforms. Examples of its use include medieval recessed platforms in Argyll, Bute and Inverness (Rennie 1994 & 1997); the ridge forts of Atlantic Scotland (see eg Dùn Mòr, Lochgilphead: Neighbour 1994); and the observatory on Calton Hill, Edinburgh (personal observation). Consequently, it is impossible to use the presence of retaining walls as a chronological marker. However, radiocarbon dating (see above) places Dùn Mór in the same approximate era as the ridge forts of Atlantic Scotland, with which it shares other similarities. Dùn Mòr, Lochgilphead (Neighbour 1994) and Dùn Chrùban, Lismore (RCAHMS 1975, 85, no 171; NMRS no NM 73 NE 2) are both duns with outworks on rock ridges. Dùn Mór, Dornie, closely resembles the lower portions of these ridges, which have been enhanced by 'short, isolated stretches of walling . . . drawn across the necks of small, natural gullies' (RCAHMS 1975, 85) and appear to provide no useful line of defence. It is probable that such stretches of walling have passed unremarked on a number of other sites. The locations of forts and duns in Argyll have been discussed by Harding (1997, 121): 'If absolute height was not a major factor in the siting of the majority of forts and duns, natural defensibility within the local terrain evidently was. Both were frequently located on rocky summits, knolls or spurs, or took advantage of precipitous ridges'. While the shape and location of the platforms at Dùn Mór closely mirrors that described for some of the forts in Argyll, it is difficult to see how it could be otherwise, given the nature of the topography. Perhaps we should dwell on the differences. Fortified ridges are generally associated with a dun, and defensive outworks. Dùn Mór, despite its name, lacks a dun and the walls which form the platforms would have been very poor defences.

Dùn Mór has a superficial similarity to the recessed platforms of Western Scotland (Rennie 1994 & 1997). The forested slopes and the dry stone walling, just visible beneath the vegetation in some of Rennie's photographs are reminiscent of how Dùn Mór appeared when the writer first visited the site (illus 4). Until recently, the recessed platforms were dismissed as charcoal-burning platforms. Rennie's survey and excavation has demonstrated that charcoal burning represents a reuse of these sites. The platforms were originally built to provide level foundations for substantial timber and stone roundhouses. They are generally roughly circular, between 6 m and 12 m in diameter, with most in the middle of this range, and occur in groups. The size variation is assumed to reflect settlement hierarchy. As the platforms have frequently been reused for charcoal burning, radiocarbon dating must be used with caution. Nevertheless, some of the structures on the platforms have been dated:

The carbon dates . . . appear to have a floruit in the early and late Medieval Periods [1000–1400 cal AD] . . . However, these dates represent only six structures out of c 2000 known Recessed Platforms and cannot therefore be representative. Further, none of the charcoal samples was taken from soil contexts sealed below the actual Platform, thus the dating relates to the structures and not to the Platforms (Rennie 1997, 167).

Although the walls which define the platforms at Dùn Mór are similarly constructed to those of the recessed platforms, the platforms are neither circular nor recessed. Excavations at Dùn Mór produced no evidence for the substantial post-holes and stone features which are typically revealed by excavation on the recessed platforms (see photographs in Rennie 1994). Indeed, rather than settlement, the only substantial feature discovered by excavation on the platforms at Dùn Mór, a low, oval cairn (L) over a 'grave-shaped' hole on Platform D, appears to be connected with burial. Sadly, this feature is undated and not stratigraphically linked with the retaining walls: it could either pre-date or post-date the use of the platforms, or be contemporaneous.

The discovery of sizeable quantities of broken 19th-century crockery suggests that modern origins for the site must also be considered. The presence of broken pottery within topsoil is often a by-product of manure-spreading, which points to the recent use of the ridge, but provides us with no information on the site's origins. However, the site's location, spectacular views and its presence within the Seaforth MacKenzies estate make it a possibility that it was constructed as a level site allowing the aristocracy — or even royalty — to admire the Highland scenery (and perhaps the oval cairn (L) on Platform D covered the burial of a favourite gun dog?) (see Andrews 1989, 197–240) for a discussion of tourism and the quest for the romantic and picturesque in the second half of the 18th century in Scotland).

If the site was landscaped in the modern period, it is possible that soil was imported from elsewhere to build up the platforms. If this were so, the finds tell us virtually nothing beyond the fact that the soil was moved at some time after the quartz was deposited in the location from whence the soil came. However, the importing of soil seems unlikely in this spot: the quantity of soil required could more easily be attained from the immediate locality and the quality of soil is too poor to have been worth bringing from elsewhere. Thus, the soil, and hence the quartz, are probably indigenous. It seems more likely that the platforms were built at an earlier date and reused in the Early Modern period.

In summary, it appears that, morphologically, Dùn Mór should be viewed as more akin to the Dark Age ridge forts of Argyll than the recessed platform settlements recorded by Rennie

(1994 & 1997). While there is evidence for Early Modern use of the ridge, it is considered that this represents the opportunistic reuse of an earlier site, rather than the construction of the platforms in the 18th or 19th century.

LOCATION

The location of Dùn Mór perhaps provides clues as to its function. The platforms were linked by a path to the east shore of Loch Duich. It appears that the site was designed to be accessed solely from the loch: there were no remains of paths or tracks leading away from the site to the landward side, which implies that it was in use before the road to the east of the site was built, after 1810 (Cuming 1810). The Rev Roderick Morison discusses the roads of the Parish of Kintail in the *Statistical Account of Scotland* in 1792. It is clear that there was no road along the north side of Loch Duich in the late 18th century:

There are no statute or military roads within the parish . . . [A] useful road was intended to be carried along the north side of Lochduich, but the tenants, after much labour and trouble, deserted it, probably for want of a proper fund to go forward. Til of late, the people of Kintail, as well as other Highlanders, had a strong aversion to roads (Morison 1792, 521).

Dùn Mór is at an important junction of waterways. The knoll at the northern end of the suite of platforms affords views to the west up Loch Alsh as far as the Skye Bridge and down Loch Duich to the south-east. It has a direct line of sight with a number of monuments of various ages including Caistel Grugaig broch and Eilean Donan castle. It is likely that the site's commanding view of the waterways was an important consideration in its positioning.

CHRONOLOGY

The dating of Dùn Mór hinges on a consideration of four strands of evidence: the artefacts recovered, the radiocarbon dates, the site's morphology and the absence of cartographic and documentary evidence.

The artefacts recovered from the excavations imply that the ridge has a long history of use (assuming that the soil was not imported, as discussed above) from at least the Late Bronze Age to the Early Modern period.

Radiocarbon dating has provided earliest possible dates for the erection (810–410 cal BC) of the platforms on Dùn Mór. The earliest date for the collapse of one of the walls (*b*) has also been gained (cal AD 250–560). These dates allow for the possibility that the site has an Iron Age or Dark Age origin. This possibility is strengthened by a consideration of the site's morphology, which has led to the conclusion that it is most similar to the (nearby) forts and duns of Argyll, although it lacks the obvious defensive aspect and scale of most of these sites.

There is no record of anything about the ridge on any map prior to the first mention of Dùn Mór on the first edition Ordnance Survey map surveyed in 1875 (Ordnance Survey 1880). The survey and excavation revealed that, while there was a substantial path to Loch Duich, there was no obvious route linking the ridge to the road to the east. This road was the first to link Sheil Bridge and Dornie and was built after 1810 (Cuming 1810). Thus, it is probable that the platforms pre-date the road, although this does not preclude a modern origin as a 'viewpoint'. Early

travellers could have come by boat; Dorothy Wordsworth records in her *Diary* that she and William were rowed along Loch Katrine by boat in 1803 (Wordsworth 1874; Ralston 1994, 19).

CONCLUSIONS

Although Dùn Mór has probably been used in one form or another since the Bronze Age and there is some evidence for its use in the Early Modern period, consideration of the radiocarbon dates suggests that it is likely that the revetted platforms on the ridge date from the Iron Age or Dark Age. The morphology of Dùn Mór is similar to the lower reaches of at least two fortified ridge sites of a similar age in Argyll. However, in general such sites are associated with a dun. Dùn Mór, despite its name, does not have a dun, and possesses little in the way of fortification. It is likely that the site's commanding view of the waterways was an important consideration in its positioning.

The possibility that the site has a later origin in the Early Modern period as a 'viewing platform' from which the aristocracy could view the Highland scenery has been considered and rejected as the primary use of the platforms.

The oval cairn and 'grave' feature (L) on platform D is of unknown date and does not sit easily with the interpretation of the site as a Dark Age ridge fort. A modern origin for this feature, during the posited reuse of the site as a viewpoint, is possible and has been considered above. Equally, the cairn may represent an entirely different phase of the site's use.

Dùn Mór may represent a variation on the Iron Age and Dark Age ridge sites previously recorded in Atlantic Scotland. It is possible that similar sites await discovery elsewhere amongst the wooded ridges along the shores of Loch Duich.

ARCHIVE AND FINDS ALLOCATION

The complete site archive for Dùn Mór will be deposited with the National Monuments Record of Scotland (NMRS). Archive reports (Neighbour 1997a & b), detailing the results of the fieldwork in full, are also lodged with the NMRS, The Highland Sites and Monuments Record and with CFA. Finds from the site will be prepared for allocation according to the requirements of Scots Law.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project was commissioned and wholly funded by Highland Council. The illustrations are by George Mudie. The fieldwork was undertaken by Kirsty Cameron, Ian Suddaby, Naomi Law, Catherine Swift, Bruce Glendinning and Andrew Heald. CFA extends its thanks to Bill Ramsay, Gordon MacIntyre and Brian Neath for their help on site and for sharing their knowledge of local history and to Dennis Harding and Roger Miket for their informed comments on the nature of the site. Particular thanks are also due to Bruce Glendinning for volunteering to talk about the site at Highland Archaeology Week in 1998. Derek Alexander, Andrew Dunwell, Dorothy Low and Ian Ralston commented on this paper. While thanks are due to the above, responsibility for the final form of this paper rests with the author and CFA.

REFERENCES

Andrefsky, W 1998 *Lithics: macroscopic approaches to analysis*. Cambridge.

- Andrews, M 1989 *The Search for the Picturesque: landscape, aesthetics and tourism in Britain, 1760–1800*. Stanford, California, USA.
- Baillie, M G L & Pilcher, J R 1983 ‘Some observations on the High Precision Calibration of routine dates’ in Ottaway, B S (ed) 1982 *Archaeology, Dendrochronology and the Radiocarbon Calibration Curve*, 51–63. Edinburgh.
- Bradley, R 1995 ‘Fieldwalking without flints: worked quartz as a clue to the character of prehistoric settlement’, *Oxford J Archaeol*, 14 (1995), 13–22.
- Brown, G (surveyor) 1795 *Plan of Intended Road from Sheil House on Loch Duich to Beauly*. MacKenzie estate map.
- Cuming, W (surveyor) 1810 *Plan of Projected Road from Sheilhouse to Dornie*. MacKenzie estate map.
- Harding, D W 1997 ‘Forts, Duns, Brochs and Crannogs: Iron Age Settlements in Argyll’, in Ritchie, G (ed) *The Archaeology of Argyll*, 118–40. Edinburgh.
- Johnston, J B 1892 *Place Names of Scotland*. London.
- Morison, R 1792 ‘Parish of Kintail’, in *The Statistical Account of Scotland, Vol XVII, Inverness-shire, Ross and Cromarty*, 519–31. (1981 reprint). London.
- Morison, J 1836 ‘Parish of Kintail’, in *The Statistical Account of Scotland, Vol XIV, Inverness, Ross and Cromarty*, 170–80. Edinburgh & London.
- Neighbour, T 1994 ‘Dùn Mór, near Lochgilphead, (Kilmichael parish)’, *Discovery Excav Scot* 1993, 75–6.
- Neighbour, T 1997a *Archaeological Field Evaluation at Dun Davie, Dornie, Highland Region: data structure report*. CFA Rep 320.
- Neighbour, T 1997b *Archaeological Field Evaluation at Dun Davie, Dornie, Highland Region: data structure report*. CFA Rep 335.
- Neighbour, T 1998 ‘Dùn Mór, Dornie, (Kintail parish): ridge with artificially enhanced platforms’, *Discovery Excav Scot* 1997, 48.
- Ordnance Survey 1880 *Ross-shire*, Sheet CXXIII, surveyed 1875.
- Ralston, I 1994 *The Trossachs Area: Cultural Heritage*. CFA Rep 189.
- RCAHMS 1975 Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland *Argyll: an inventory of the ancient monuments: Volume 2, Lorn*. Edinburgh.
- Rennie, E B 1994 ‘The Recessed Platforms of Western Scotland’, *Current Archaeol*, 138 (1994), 204–10.
- Rennie, E B 1997 *The Recessed Platforms of Argyll, Bute and Inverness*. Oxford (= BAR Brit Ser, 253).
- Schweingrüber, F H 1990 *Microscopic Wood Anatomy*. Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research.
- Stuiver, M & Kra, R S (eds) 1986 ‘Calibration issue, proceedings of the 12th International ¹⁴C conference’, *Radiocarbon*, 28 (2B) (1986), 805–1030.
- Warren, G M 1997 ‘The chipped stone’, in Neighbour 1997b, 22–7.
- Watson, W J 1926 *History of the Celtic Place-names of Scotland*. Edinburgh & London.
- Whittaker, J C 1994 *Flint Knapping: making and understanding stone tools*. Austin, Texas, USA.
- Wordsworth, D 1874 *Recollections on a Tour made in Scotland AD 1803*. Shairp, J C (ed). Edinburgh.

This paper is published with the aid of a grant from Highland Council