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Post-medieval settlement in the Isle of Lewis: a study in adaptability or change?

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ABSTRACT

While the work of historical geographers has produced a rich literature concerning medieval and later rural settlement in Scotland this body of work has frequently been used in an uncritical manner by those archaeologists who study the period, often to the exclusion of developing a suitable theoretical and methodological basis for archaeological research. However appropriate these models are for the 'big history' paradigms of the disciplines which generated them, they fail to address several issues which are key to the archaeologist. By way of contrast, this paper investigates the pre-crofting settlement of two areas of the Isle of Lewis to argue that to understand post-medieval settlement it is necessary to utilise both conventional archaeological survey and theoretical considerations of how societies interact and react to the particular environment in which they are placed.

INTRODUCTION

The nature of the Scottish farming township has become so well known that its appearance has largely been set in stone; a rough agglomeration of peasant housing set amongst unenclosed fields, a basic form which remains unchanging be it *baile*, fermtoun or clachan, medieval or pre-Improvement. If the lowland fermtoun or Highland *baile* was a chaotic institution then its disorder is prescribed within strictly defined limits, if it was subject to a dynamic process then it is a thoroughly predictable dynamism; coalescing, dividing and evolving within a basic, immutable form.

That, with an admitted rhetorical flourish, may best describe the historical picture of Scottish post-medieval settlement in the broadest terms. The seed for this paper is a growing awareness of the limitations of such generalist models, especially so when they fail to recognise the importance of adaptability and individual responses to local conditions, or whether aspects of regional cultures might well override such broad brush concepts. More pertinent is the fact that many of the field remains encountered by the archaeologist – particularly those presented in this paper – do not fit readily or at all into the familiar framework of the historical geographer and indeed may contradict basic aspects of the most familiar historical tenets used to describe medieval and later settlement.

While traditional models may serve the needs of historical geographers and economic historians the author believes they serve poorly the needs of the archaeologist, largely because they concern themselves with questions the archaeologist by and large does not ask. Equally so some admittedly pioneering work in the field of rural settlement has found itself cowed by the primacy of the historical record, relying on a historical construct of the field remains rather than utilising the archaeology as the primary source of information.

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HORACE FAIRHURST AND THE CREATION OF THE CLACHAN

The purpose of this section is not to discuss the history of research of Scotland's rural past, as has been done elsewhere (Morrison 2000). Rather, it is to critically examine the manner in which general concepts of the nature of medieval and post-medieval settlement have taken precedence over a nuanced examination of the subject. The figure of Horace Fairhurst stands undoubtedly at the forefront of Scottish rural settlement studies and his work at Lix and Rosal are amongst the first serious excavations of such sites. Fairhurst's work was undoubtedly pioneering but his methodology included a number of false turnings, most important of which is what might be termed his creation of the *clachan*. This term is synonymous with post-medieval settlement today but it is important to remember that it is not a term with deep historical roots but rather was first formalised as a term in Fairhurst's work (Fairhurst 1960, 69). Although a brief concession to regional variation is made, Fairhurst's clachan appears as an idealised universal form with its 'group farms, worked in runrig, with infield and outfield cultivation, involving the co-operative efforts of some four or more tenants' with the argument that cooperative farming was the *raison d'être* of the clachan (ibid).

It may seem unfair to criticise a work almost 50 years old at the time of writing and this is not the author's aim. Rather, it is to argue that Fairhurst's methodology relied on historical documents to provide a settled view of post-medieval settlement with the field evidence being adapted or ignored to better fit this unwieldy frame. In effect, Fairhurst's creation or invention of the quintessential *clachan* relied heavily on the historical rather than the archaeological record. For a paper purporting to deal with the physical remains of such settlements it is striking how little the field remains feature and how often their features are subverted to the narrative of the historical records.

This standard model of how a township should look and behave provided a convenient physical template upon which to hang the historical geographical models of post-medieval settlement in Scotland. This model of township organisation is familiar enough that it would be redundant to elaborate here and attained fullest expression in Whittington's contribution to Baker and Butlin's UK wide volume (Whittington 1973). As with Fairhurst, Whittington's model for Scotland dwells little on regional variation; this is a very odd omission in a volume where regionalism is allowed full vent in the English and Welsh contexts; there are no less than eight chapters on differing English regions whilst Scotland – and intriguingly, Ireland – has one chapter.

The familiar ingredients of infield-outfield, runrig and head-dykes come together to produce a 'formless group of houses' (Whittington 1973, 536) huddled between the head-dyke and the cultivable land, the latter organised and farmed by the communal endeavour of the runrig system. The historical evidence for this township organisation is thought to be so convincing that it comes as a surprise to discover that much of it deals with very specific cases, often dealing with only one farm or township. For example, the standard model for infield-outfield is based on the study of a single mid-18th-century Aberdeenshire farm (Dixon 1994, 30). It is, of course, the job of the historian to build a wider picture from these individual observations but it is justifiable to ask to what extent a universal model can be constructed from specific and unique instances, or to what extent we are justified in looking for a universal model at all. It must be stressed this is not an attempt to perform a wholesale act of iconoclasm; there is no doubt that the many historical sources are accurate reflections for the specific time and locality they pertain to yet it is by no means a foregone conclusion that they reflect aspects of universal practices. Doubtless many of the aspects discussed above hold true when applied with discrimination

(eg Dodghson 1977) yet it is the case that the application of historical records is most effective when applied consistently to the locality from which they are derived (eg Donnelly 2000) rather than distilled and refined into universal conclusions. The assumptions that Scotland had such a universal system of agriculture appear to be simply assumptions, no matter how well referenced they appear to be, and as far as this author is aware, there seems to be no explicit rationale to justify such a belief.

Simply put, can such a simple schematic form of settlement – with all its political and social implications – explain the strategies required to exist in environments as distinct from the Aberdeenshire heartlands as the Outer Hebrides? More important is whether we are justified in viewing a society solely through the prism of its agricultural organisation. The point here is that the most common models used were designed by and for historical geographers and economic historians, not for the use of archaeologists. As such they touch upon the concerns and aims of these disciplines, not those of the archaeologist; the question of whether a society should be categorised solely by the method of agricultural production would not even be posed, less answered, for any other archaeological period.

MODELLING A HIGHLAND SOCIETY: RUNRIG AGRICULTURE AND THE TACKSMAN SYSTEM

The reservations expressed thus far also hold true for what are perhaps the two main social constructs for Highland society, namely runrig agriculture and the system of landholding as expressed through the tacksman system. The concept – however vague – of runrig agriculture is deemed integral to the management of the post-medieval township and in many discussions the exact nature of the system is glossed over. As Whittington has pointed out, the definition of runrig varies between time and place, from a system whereby different strips of township land are allotted to different tenants to one where the land was worked communally and the crop only divided up after harvesting (Whittington 1973, 539–40). Whatever the intricacies of the runrig system and the manner in which it varied from place to place – and reading the various first-hand accounts, there seems no doubt that it did – it is probably best summed up as a generic agricultural system based on a communal system of land management in each township (Dixon 1994, 30). Again, in spite of the apparent universality of the system it cannot be assumed that runrig was a standard method of township organisation, nor that the runrig system was an inevitable happenstance of history; rather in some cases the tenants themselves could decide whether or not to employ it (Dodghson 1998, 54).

The final aspect to be considered here is one often thought to be central to Highland rural settlement: that of the system of land holding and the attendant tripartite social structure of proprietor, tacksman and tenant. Again, it would seem redundant to describe in detail a system covered elsewhere and the author's objection is not that this system did not exist or is inappropriate to the area in question; rather that the concentration on the class relationships of the society tell us very little about society as a whole. While they produce an excellent picture of the relationships between the top percentile of Highland rural society and the tenant class below them, they do a very poor job of elucidating relationships between those who lay below the tacksman class. In other words, the model tells us little to nothing about the interactions and obligations between those who comprised the vast majority of society. As with the reservations expressed previously with defining a society solely by agricultural practices, it is hard to think of another archaeological period where this would be accepted. The focus on the tacksman class has ensured that study of medieval and later settlement is the only

period where the individual is given no credit in determining and performing their own actions. While prehistorians can conceive of structures as varied as Neolithic funerary monuments and Iron Age brochs as being constructed by ties of cooperation and mutual obligation, it seems that the post-medieval descendants of these builders were incapable of planting crops without explicit direction from their social betters. There is no doubt that the traditional system of tacksman and tenant did exist but there is no reason to assume that it dominated every aspect of township life, especially where the evidence indicates that to be successful, communal systems of agriculture must be created and maintained at the lowest level rather than imposed from the top down (Ostrom 1990).

In conclusion the author would argue that many archaeologists have been too accepting of general historical conceptions at the cost of relegating the field evidence to a supporting chorus. It has been persuasively argued elsewhere that much recent archaeological work in the period has remained at the empirical level, an excessive reliance and deference to historical documents meaning that recent archaeological work has not played an active part in constructing the rural past:

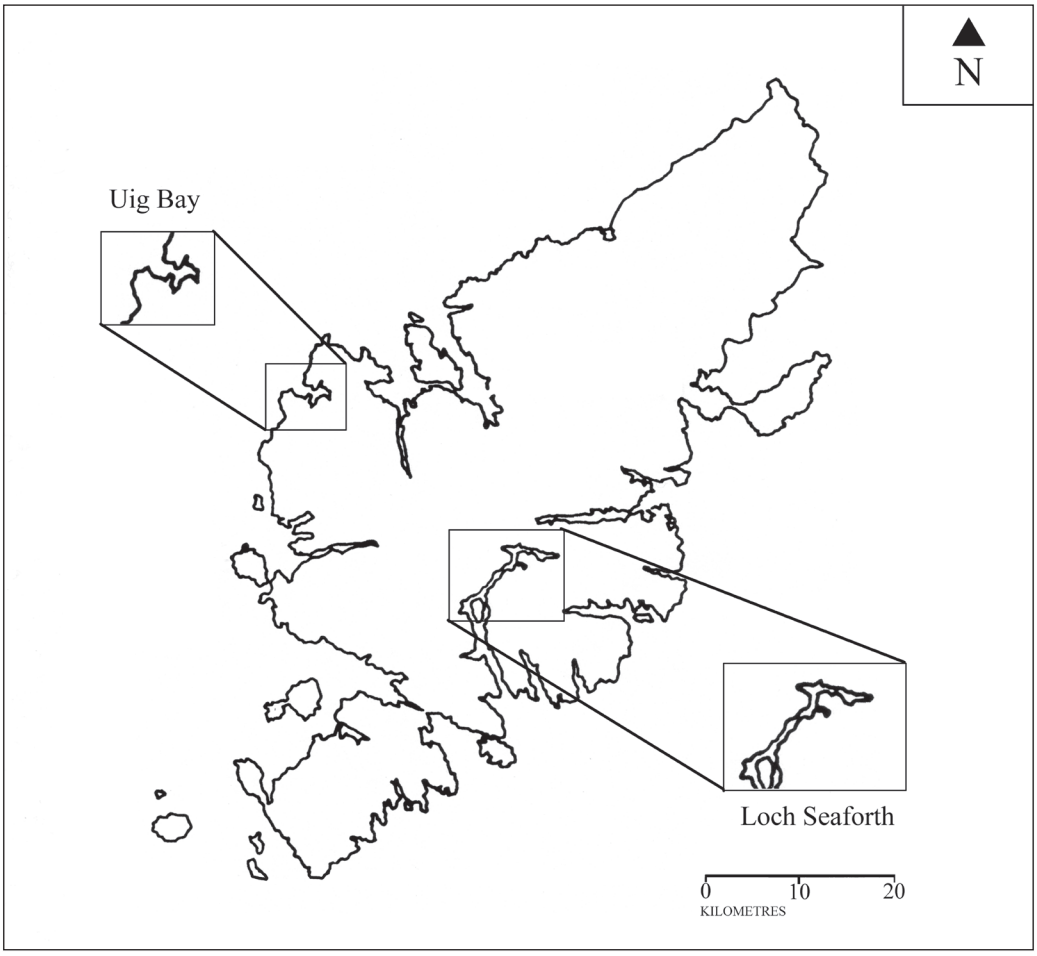
> archaeologists have, on the whole, uncritically accepted narratives created and defined in another disciplinary context without reference to the relevant archaeological material they apparently wish to elucidate (Dalglish 2002, 476).

This seems surprising, especially when considering the body of work which has emanated from social sciences methodologically and philosophically more congenial to archaeology than economic history (eg Holm 2002).

This epistemological timidity is all the more surprising when we consider both the quantity and quality of the archaeological evidence which survives for the period. However one might care to define the raw numbers of sites, it is clear that the surviving numbers of sites presents a massive resource, both in individual sites and landscapes of settlement. While this material has lent itself well to landscape level analysis (eg Cowley 1997), what appears to be lacking are studies which bridge the gap between the landscape level and the study of individual sites by comparing different townships and the buildings they comprise.

THE NATURE OF THE HIGHLAND TOWNSHIP: RECENT STUDIES

The limitations of the basic model discussed above have been apparent for some time; Dodghson's work on west Highland rentals and estate maps suggested a consistent trend for townships to have a number of dispersed settlement clusters rather than a single nucleated settlement core. Most telling is an 1817 estate map of North and South Bragar on the Isle of Lewis which shows the two settlements consisting of a number of dispersed sub-settlements (Dodghson 1993, 424–7). Dodghson's argument was that the estate documents depicted settlement in a transitive state, caught at a mid-point in a process whereby individual farmsteads were gathered together into nucleated townships. The impetus for this change is considered to be the gradually increasing influence of mainstream European practices on local landholding customs (ibid, 434–5). That is, it is a change imposed on society by those who in practice owned the land rather than those who lived and worked on it. The evidence presented could however be used in another way; if there is evidence for dispersed townships on Lewis as late as 1817 then what grounds are there for assuming that nucleated townships are the natural state of things? As with the above critique of Fairhurst it remains an a priori assumption that a 'proper' post-medieval township is invariably nucleated. While it is desirable to view the problem through a western European perspective it seems questionable that the influence of 'feudal ideas' (Dodghson 1993, 435) can be the prime and only mover in a society, or that we should



ILLUS 1 Map of Lewis and Harris. Areas discussed in the text are highlighted

view such influences as naturally overwriting local custom and practice.

The evidence presented in this paper will argue that the Bragar estate map caught the settlement pattern not in a transitory state but in its natural state. Although estate maps viewed individually are a useful means of viewing the state of settlement at a particular time, bringing together maps from different localities and periods can often serve to confuse. By way of contrast, this study will examine the settlement evidence of two areas of Lewis from the earliest reliable maps until clearance and crofting brought an end to the traditional mode of settlement (illus 1).

THE NATURE OF THE POST-MEDIEVAL TOWNSHIP IN LEWIS: STABILITY OR ADAPTABILITY?

The discovery that many post-medieval Hebridean townships did not possess a nucleated settlement core naturally raises the question whether these settlements differed from the idealised model in other ways, a question which can be answered by a close

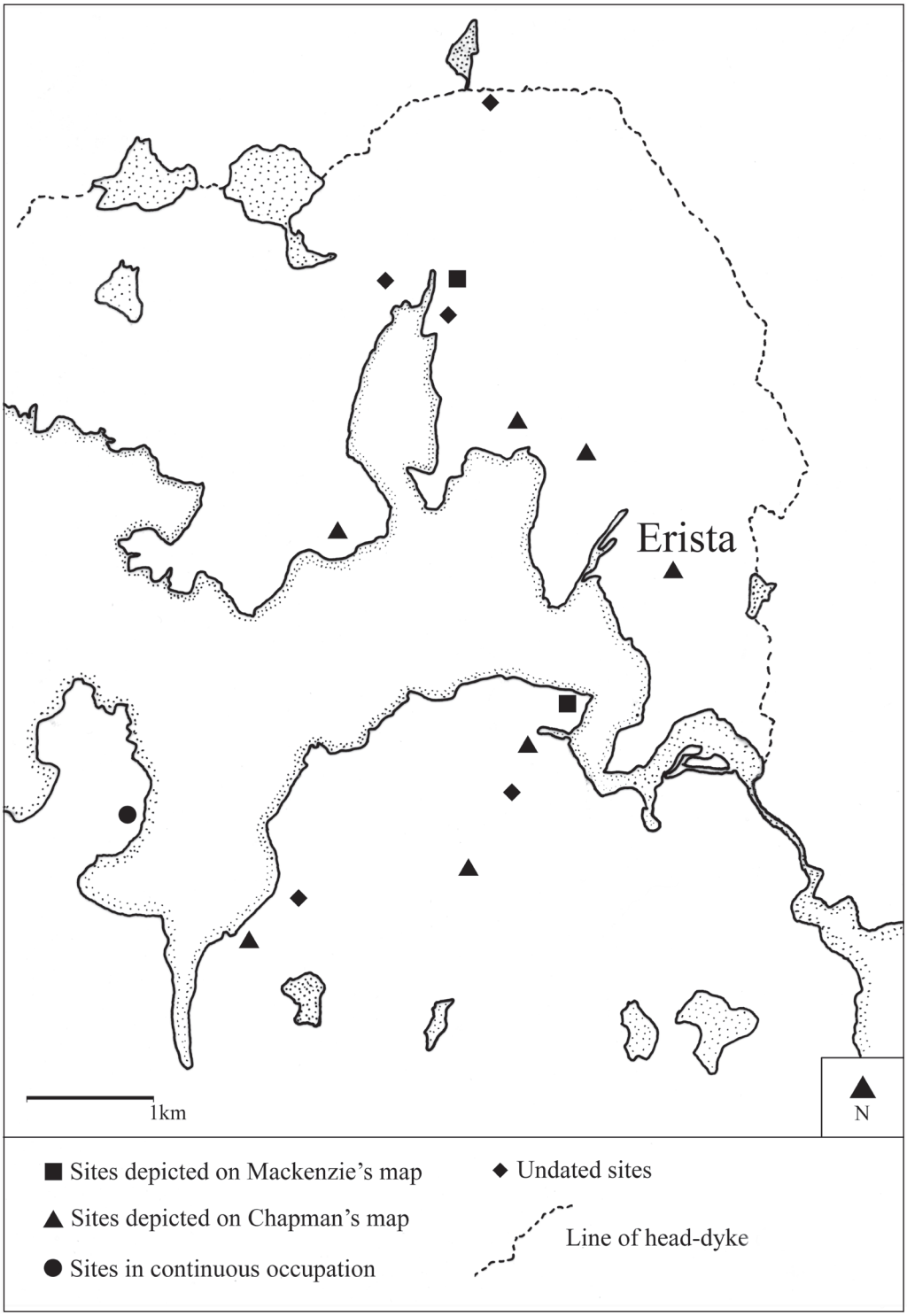
study of the cartographic evidence. The study of pre-crofting settlement on the Isle of Lewis is helped greatly by the existence of three high quality maps made over the course of a century; taken individually they offer a snapshot of settlement conditions on the ground at the time of their creation. Taken together they provide vital evidence of how these settlement patterns changed over time.

The first of these maps is Murdoch Mackenzie's survey of *c* 1750, primarily intended to complement the map of the mainland produced by the contemporary Military Survey of Scotland (Bray 1996, 61). Mackenzie's survey of Lewis was only succeeded as an original document by James Chapman's survey of 1807–9, in form a classic estate map of the early 19th century which was intended to provide a clear and accurate picture of the island to inform the decisions to improve and clear the land. Thus it depicts the island and its township structure on the eve of the Clearances. Although Chapman's original plan is now lost (Caird 1989, 51–2), a number of accurate reproductions were made; for the purposes of this paper the copy referred to is William Johnson's reduction of 1821. Both of these maps are held in the Map Room of the National Library of Scotland and can be consulted online via their digitised map library; in this sense it seems superfluous to reproduce details here.

The final map to be used in this study is the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map of Lewis undertaken between 1848–52; unusually this survey was partly funded by the owner of Lewis who required a modern survey to inform his reorganisation of the crofting system (RCAHMS 2002, 67). By comparing the resultant maps with surviving field remains it is clear that both inhabited and abandoned settlements were recorded with an impressive level of detail, recording house profiles, kailyards and both abandoned and active field systems. The accuracy is such that the maps can be used as a record for settlement which has been later destroyed by crofting activity.

It is clear from the study of these maps that many general assumptions regarding the nature and functioning of townships can be challenged. The relationship between the township and its head-dyke is conventionally considered to reflect an important distinction between infield and outfield pasture and a demarcation reflecting the arable property of a particular economic unit (Whittington 1973, 532–5). A close study of these maps suggests instead that the head-dykes have little relationship to the townships behind them. An excellent example of this is the field remains along the north and east sides of Uig Bay where both Mackenzie and Chapman record several townships enclosed not within individual head-dykes but surrounded by a massive head-dyke which sweeps around the whole of the bay (illus 2). The existence of this dyke can be confirmed by aerial photography and it is clear that two or more townships sharing a head-dyke is a common feature in Lewis; it can be seen – again on both maps – in the pairing off of Mealista with Brenish and Mangersta with Islivig on the west coast and again north of Tolsta on the east coast where one head-dyke seems to act simply as a demarcation of the fertile coastal strip. In this sense it is clear that the head-dyke simply demarcates the area behind which settlement occurs rather than the individual property of a particular township. This may appear to be a statement of the banal but it is clear that the head-dyke does not function in the standard interpretation as a marker both functional and proprietorial; with two or more townships apparently sharing a common intake of pasture and arable land it is hard to see what role the head-dyke plays in the fundamental organisation of settlement beyond its most basic role of protecting the crop.

This absence of individual head-dykes may be a pragmatic response to another notable feature of Lewis townships, namely the remarkable mobility of settlement. By comparing the township distribution depicted on the maps of Mackenzie and Chapman it is clear that the settlement pattern changed dramatically in the intervening period. In the particular case of Uig,



ILLUS 2 Map of Uig bay, depicting changing township distribution. Townships discussed in text are named

of the three townships marked on Mackenzie's map only one was still inhabited by the time of Chapman's map and a further seven settlements of various sizes have appeared (illus 2). Given the length of time elapsed between each map it might seem reasonable to conclude that this is a natural and unremarkable change in settlement distribution yet there is other evidence to suggest that Chapman's map does not depict the end result of a wholesale change in settlement distribution but rather that both maps capture a moment in an ongoing and continual process of shifting settlement. A study of both aerial photographs and 1st Edition Ordnance Survey maps reveals a thick cluster of other settlement sites within the Uig head-dyke which are similar in morphology and distribution to those found on the maps (illus 2). Taken together these sites suggest a continual process whereby settlements appear, disappear and shift location with surprising ease. An insight into how quickly such settlements could appear can be seen by comparing Chapman's estate map with the list of settlements cleared to make way for the Park sheep farm in the 1820s. These settlements include Stromas on Loch Seaforth and Gearraidh Righsaidh on Loch Shell (MacDonald 1978, 162). These ruins of these townships can be found easily on the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map but they did not exist at the time of Chapman's map. There seems no more persuasive illustration of the dynamic nature of settlement than the fact that new townships were springing up right up until the point when the landscape was cleared of all settlement.

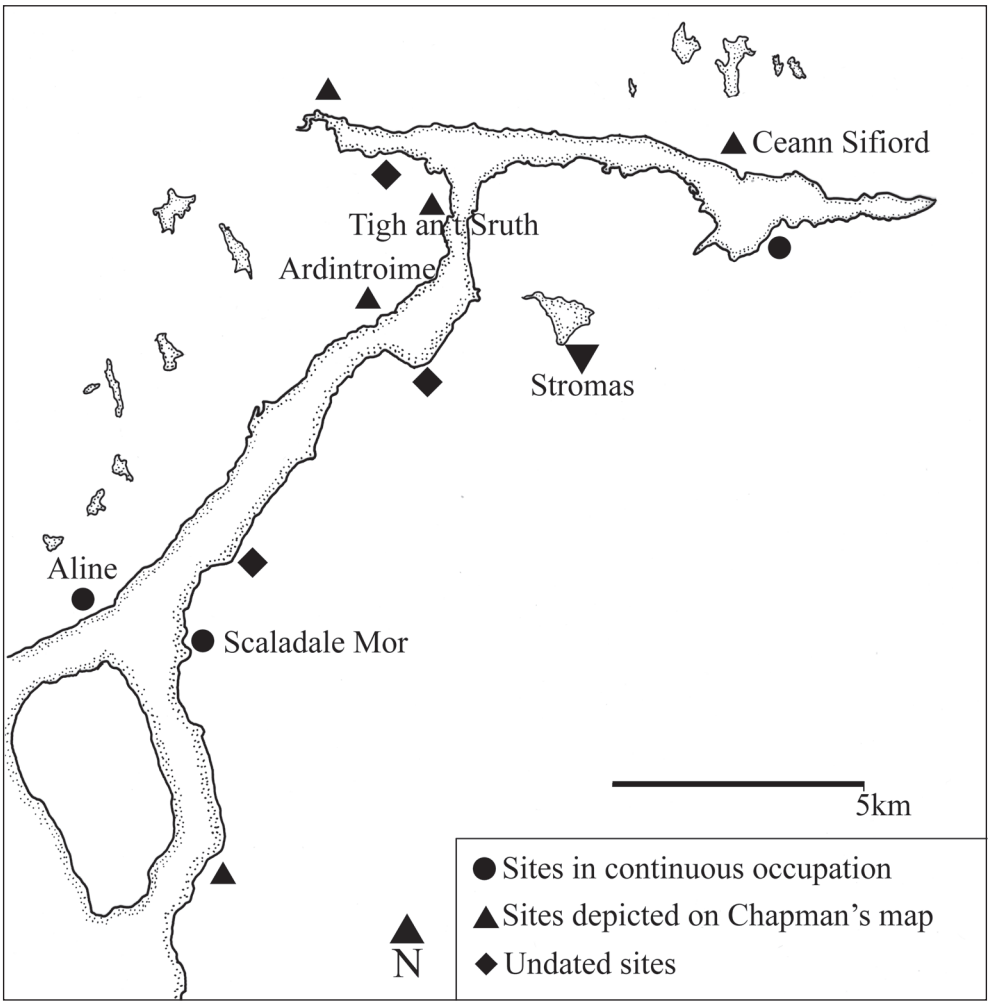
With the fashionable concept of marginality in mind it seems wrong to categorise this settlement pattern as an ebb and flow but rather as a constant use and reuse of sites with townships founded and sites reused as often as they were abandoned. The fact that some sites remained in use while others were founded would militate against a primarily environmental explanation reliant on the concept of marginal landscapes.

While the abandonment and replacement of single house sites within the township has been ably discussed elsewhere (Dodghson 1993, 422–3) the explanation for the movement and replacement of whole townships is less clear. This is an important point; while the frequent replacement of house sites could arguably be explained by such structures reaching the end of their natural life this is not a viable explanation to account for the abandonment of an area of cultivable ground and all the house sites therein. Any explanation provided must account for a reason more meaningful than a particular dwelling reaching the end of its useful life.

LOCH SEAFORTH

This picture of constant change and shifting settlement is the background for the study of the area of north Loch Seaforth.

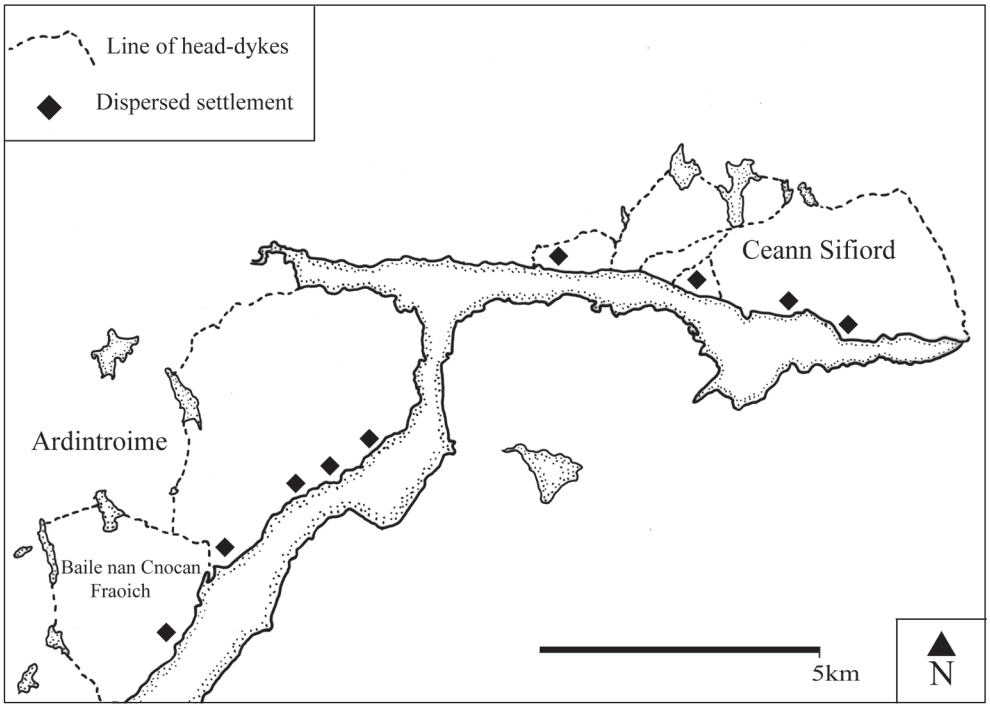
The decision to focus on the Loch Seaforth area was taken for a number of reasons. Firstly previous work on Lewis has tended to focus on settlements on the machair; this is understandable given the density of monuments but the concern remains that a continued emphasis on such sites would give only a partial view of the settlement as it was tailored to a particular topography and settlement density. In contrast to those sites on the machair Loch Seaforth holds the distinction – with the exception of the north-west extremity – of never having been divided into crofts, instead the townships having been cleared for the Park sheep farm (MacDonald 1978, 162). Thus it has avoided the main destroyer of pre-crofting sites, the intensive reorganisation of field systems and house sites which crofting initiated. This, and the overall lower settlement density, has allowed relict settlement to survive which on the machair would have been destroyed and whose presence could now only be detected by specialist techniques (Banks & Atkinson 2000). As might now be expected the settlement pattern on Loch Seaforth shows considerable variation over time: Mackenzie's depiction of the loch in the mid-18th century shows three settlements which are still inhabited by the time of Chapman's survey having been joined by four new townships and an outlier of nearby Shildenish, a township to



ILLUS 3 Map of Loch Seaforth, depicting changing township distribution. Townships discussed in text are named

the north on Loch Erisort (illus 3). As with Uig Bay, there are other settlement sites which do not appear on either map which again suggests a sustained mobility of settlement; these include the township of Stromas founded after the completion of Chapman's map. In many ways the settlement history of Loch Seaforth reflects that of Uig Bay and it may seem redundant to discuss what amounts to the same case twice. Nevertheless, the consistency between the two areas is of interest in itself and the lack of intensive later activity on Loch Seaforth has ensured the settlement remains are preserved with an impressive degree of clarity which allows additional information to be adduced.

As discussed above, Dodghson has argued that the apparent uneasy co-existence of nucleated and dispersed settlement can be explained as the mid-point of a process whereby the pressures of new landholding practices forced individual farmsteads to agglomerate as nucleated farmsteads (Dodghson 1993, 435).

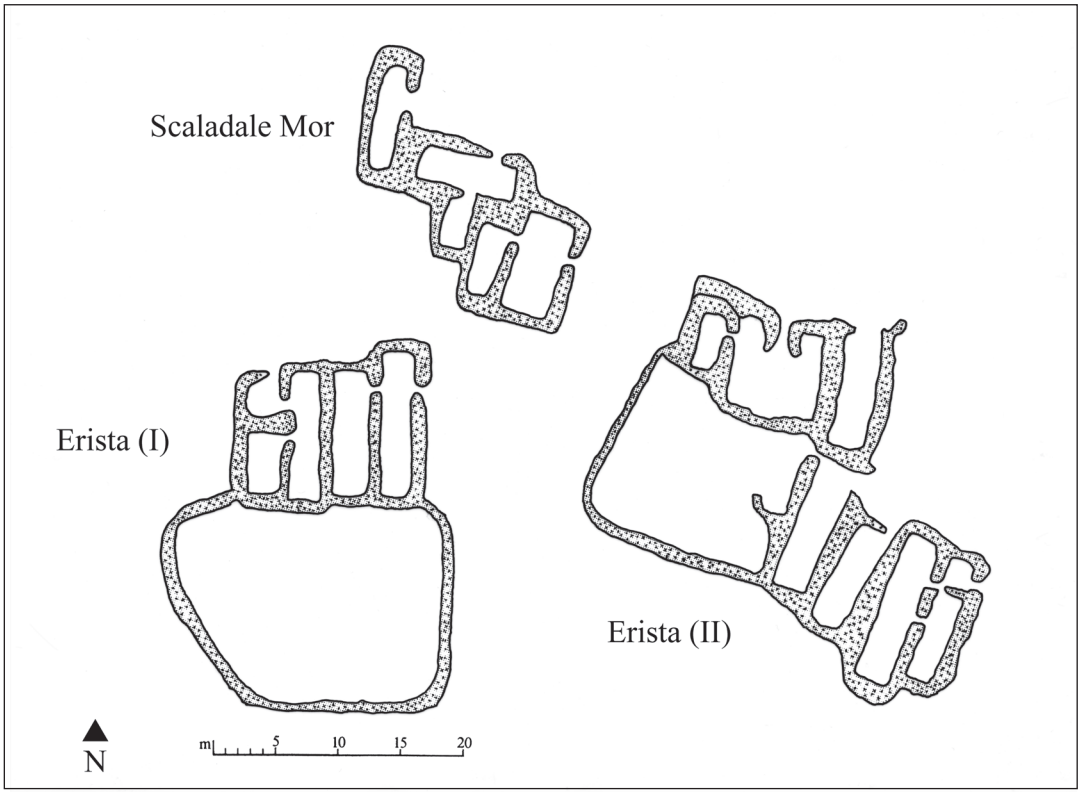


ILLUS 4 Map depicting dispersed settlement distribution in the townships of Ardintroime and Ceann Sifiord. The dispersed settlement of Baile nan Cnocan Fraoich is marked

Nevertheless the settlement evidence from Loch Seaforth suggests that nucleated, dispersed and indeed individual farmsteads co-existed as a natural part of the settlement landscape. A study of the field remains within the boundaries of each township produces some surprising results. The settlement of Aline – in continued occupation until final clearance in the 1830s – has a single nucleated settlement core. By way of contrast the township of Ardintroime comprises five separate settlement cores while Ceann Sifiord has four (illus 4). Of course, assuming the contemporaneity of settlement on the ground can often be an assumption too far (RCAHMS 1993, 10) but in this case there is other evidence to suggest that the settlement distribution in these townships is not a palimpsest of settlement produced over time but rather a reality recognised by estate maps of the time. A close study of Chapman's map reveals that two different methods of depicting a township are used. The first method is the name of the township closely written on the map, usually alongside a cluster of oblongs depicting the settlement. The second method is simply the township name written in large, evenly spaced letters across the townships lands. When comparing the townships depicted on the map with the settlement remains on the ground, the first style of depiction is used for nucleated townships like Aline while the latter is used for dispersed townships with multiple sub-settlements like Ardintroime. This correlation between the map and type of township is exact and the alternative explanation of a settlement palimpsest within the head-dykes would have to explain this coincidence as well as why earlier remains survived in some townships but not in others.

All this is somewhat of a precursor to the question of what exactly a township on post-medieval Lewis looked like.

In considering why and how a settlement landscape with both dispersed and nucleated settlements could co-exist it seems appropriate to compare each type of township with each other. The nucleated township of Scaladale Mor on Loch Seaforth is depicted on the maps of both Mackenzie and Chapman and appears to have been in continuous occupation until it was cleared in the 1820s at the latest (MacDonald 1978, 162). The final phase of occupation is built upon a settlement mound almost tell-like in appearance – a suitable testament to the length of occupation – and appears as a cluster of conjoined longhouses (illus 5). It may be tempting to follow in the footsteps of other fieldworkers in the islands and name these buildings Complex Atlantic Longhouses but, like brochs, these buildings too have a perfectly good name; work in the 19th century records that the locals referred to the ruins of these buildings as *creaga* (Thomas 1867, 156–7). The pioneering work of Thomas recorded the houses of Lewis at a time when some of the inhabitants could recall the previous way of life and Thomas notes their explanation that such houses were intended to house more than one family (ibid). This fact may be seen to be obvious by an examination of the *creaga* themselves but it is nevertheless an important point. In one sense Scaladale Mor appears to conform to the classic model of a Highland



ILLUS 5 Examples of *creaga* from the nucleated township of Scaladale Mor, Loch Seaforth and the two surviving examples from the dispersed township of Erista, Uig

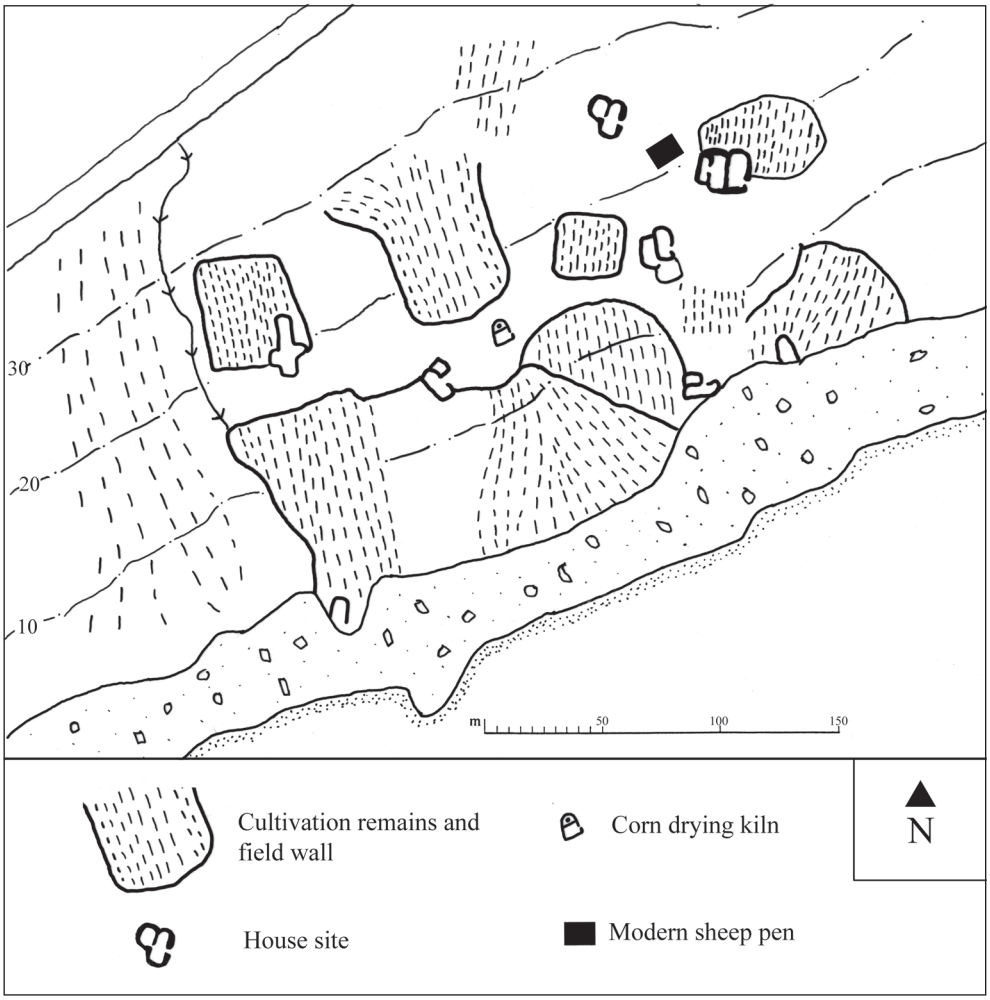
baile and with the *creaga* at the core of the settlement it seems a reasonable assumption that the inhabitants lived and worked together; in effect, a system which might conform to the broad definition of runrig.

In comparison the township of Erista on Uig Bay first appears on Chapman's map and comprised a series of dispersed settlements (illus 2). Although the remains are now truncated by modern settlement, as recorded on the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey, the abandoned township consisted of a number of settlement clusters separated by around 200–300m from each other, in effect giving the appearance of independent farmsteads. Two of these survive to this day and are shown in illus 5. It seems clear that each surviving settlement element of Erista is a *creaga* remarkably similar to that at Scaladale Mor. That the same type of settlement element can exist as a nucleated settlement and as the constituent elements of a dispersed township would suggest it forms an underlying building block of township organisation. It seems appropriate to consider the nature of the settlement at Erista in light of the dispersed township elements first highlighted by Dodghson (1993, 424–7). If we consider that dispersed townships were in many cases made up of *creaga* it suggests that the real level of township organisation lay below that of the township itself and that many townships were in reality a series of separate cooperative endeavours based around the family groups who lived in these *creaga*. As with Scaladale Mor the evidence would perhaps suggest a form of runrig, albeit a more nuanced one to that discussed above and which existed at the level of these *creaga* rather than at the level of the township.

This would not, however, explain why nucleated and dispersed townships co-exist to the extent that such dissimilar townships can be found next to each other on Loch Seaforth; an explanation for this may be found in the fact that however neat the juxtaposition between the two townships discussed above not all townships conform to this pattern.

Directly across the loch from Scaladale Mor lies the township of Aline, again a nucleated settlement both on the evidence of Chapman's map and the field evidence on the ground and occupied at the same time as Scaladale Mor. The field remains of Aline do however show a completely different township organisation (illus 6). Although a nucleated settlement, there is no evidence of conjoined houses or communally worked fields but rather a series of individual houses, the majority of which have individual plots of land attached to them. In practice it is difficult to think of a settlement pattern further removed from those discussed above, nor one less conducive to the practice of a runrig system. In this case the township seems to exist as a series of individual endeavours based around single families and the example of Aline is by no means an aberration. As previously discussed, the township of Ardintroime consists of five dispersed settlement elements and one of these is worthy of particular note. The settlement element at Baile nan Cnocan Fraoich consists of two houses, each set within an individual plot of land and other attached fields (illus 4 and 7). As with Aline, it seems just to conclude that the system of farming practised here was not runrig. This trend also appears in its logical extreme at the settlement of Tigh an t-Srùth which is marked on Chapman's map (illus 3). This survives on the ground today and as the name – 'house of the stream' – would suggest consists of a single house, not as an element of a dispersed settlement but marked on Chapman's map as a township in its own right. This tendency for houses to exist as solitary settlements is not uncommon and other examples can be found easily on the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey maps.

Just as both dispersed and nucleated townships can consist of *creaga* – which might suggest a system not dissimilar from runrig – they can also consist of houses which possess individual plots of land or solitary farmsteads. The coexistence of all these elements along the shore of Loch Seaforth right until the imposition

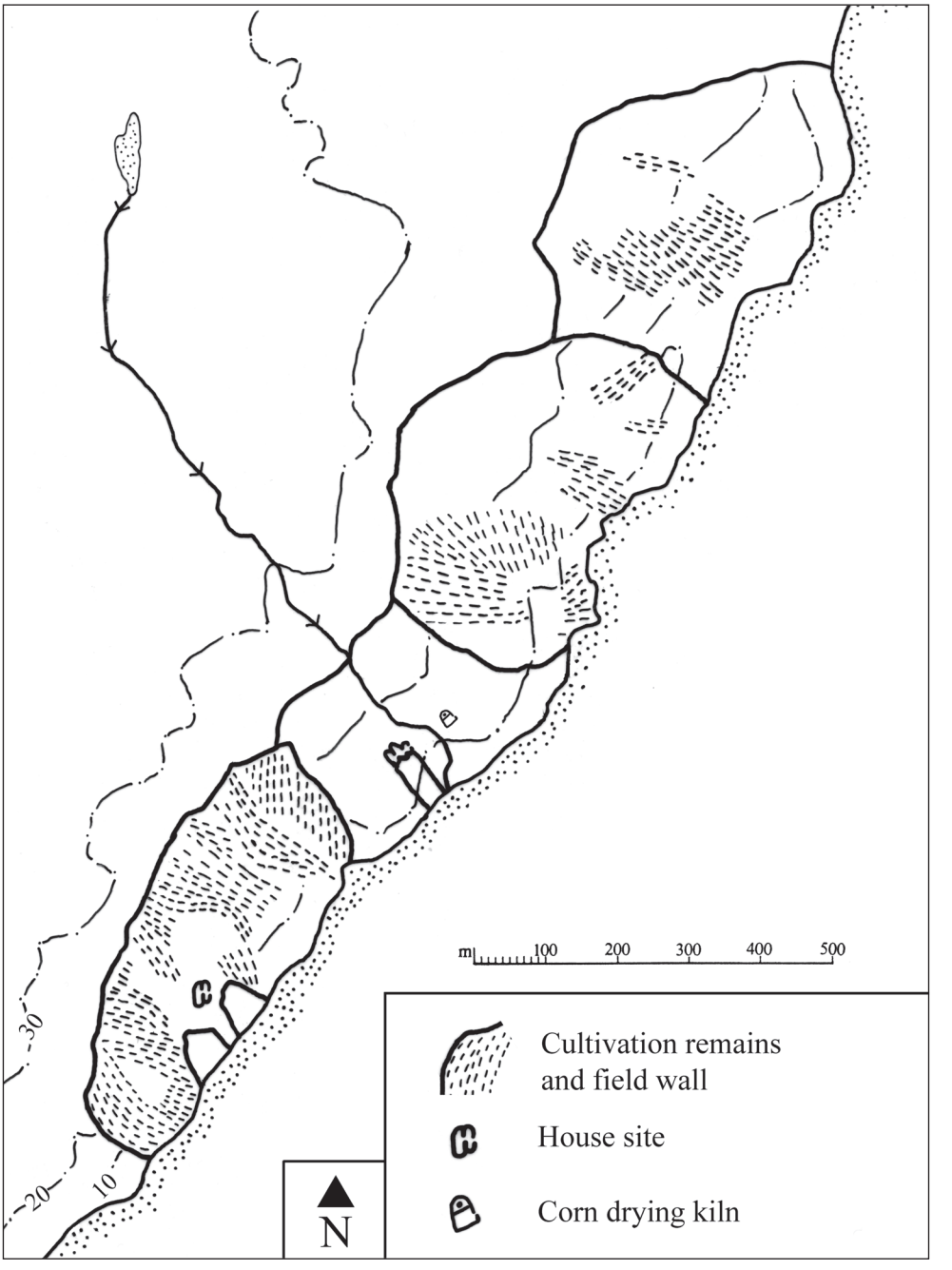


ILLUS 6 The nucleated township of Aline, Loch Seaforth, showing houses and attached individual fields

of clearance and crofting does not support the suggestion that settlements were slowly pushed towards nucleation as part of a wholesale change in landholding organisation. The account of the settlement here would lend itself to one conclusion; that post-medieval settlement on Lewis had no defining characteristic, that it consisted of both dispersed and nucleated elements and could comprise both clear indicators of communal endeavour and markers of individual undertaking.

CONCLUSION

In some ways the problems raised by this discovery become somewhat less acute if we consider society from a more nuanced perspective than that of the mode of agriculture. While the traditional model of runrig places prime consideration on the agricultural make up of the township, it places little to no consideration on other important aspects such as transhumance, the exploitation of other resources nor the



ILLUS 7 The settlement at Baile nan Cnocan Fraoich, a dispersed settlement element from the township of Ardintroime

communal or individual organisation required to exploit them. By way of contrast, the study of similar north Atlantic regions have paid more attention to such questions, particularly so to the range of social and economic adaptations required for a society to thrive in often adverse conditions. It may be extreme to label Lewis a marginal environment in the manner of other north Atlantic regions, yet it remains that the characteristics of the region presented specific challenges and limitations to agriculture (Dodghson 2000, 111).

In considering settlement in Norway, Martens (1992, 2) has argued that 'settlement depends upon the total resources available for exploitation, and not only the conditions for farming'. To take this proposition to the logical conclusion one may have farms where the primary economy is not agriculture but the exploitation of other resources, as is indeed the case in Norway (ibid). A specific example of this can be found on the medieval and early modern farmstead on the island of Flatey, Iceland, where midden analysis has demonstrated that bird and marine resources outweighed agriculture as the main subsistence factor, in spite of the apparent primacy of the latter (Amundsen 2004). In essence, Martens' case can be summarised by the argument that many of the social groups one finds in such societies reflect the groupings and organisations necessary to perform specific economic tasks (Martens 1992, 3–4). In this sense it would be unrealistic to expect a society to be organised primarily around the task of agriculture.

In the particular case of Lewis it is not hard to think of aspects which must have played as important a role as agriculture. The most obvious is the transhumance economy; while often considered an ancillary to the main townships it is clear that shielings should be considered an equally important counterpart to the main settlement (Cheape 1997). In that sense the maintenance and organisation of shieling grounds should be considered as primary a factor in social organisation as the organisation of the main townships. Indeed, given the issues discussed above it seems not unreasonable to argue that the traditional relationship could be inverted and that a township may simply reflect the social organisation of a particular shieling group. Equally so, the construction and maintenance of such essential communal facilities as horizontal mills and grain drying kilns should be considered an important factor which settlements might organise themselves around. In considering these aspects the stark difference between the *creaga* and those individual longhouses calls into question the concept of the household, both in the strict sense of the family and the larger socio-economic connotations of that term. Again, this concept has been framed in terms congenial to the archaeologist for other north Atlantic regions (eg Ringstedt 1989).

The closeness of many Lewis townships to the coast is an important indicator of the potential importance of maritime resources, running from littoral exploitation and fish traps to fishing; again, use of these resources imply social organisations organised around these requirements, most obviously the crewing of vessels (Martens 1992, 3–4). The importance of distilling to the Highland economy is well established (Brown 2000) as is its reliance on the crops, kilns and mills which form an integral part of the rural economy. The process whereby the raw materials are converted to finished products seems a good example of cooperative effort between individuals. Given the fiscal value of the finished product and the well attested role it seems not unreasonable to argue that a settlement could be organised around the production of whisky; in a sense a settlement established for commercial, rather than subsistence, ends.

These are the more obvious options and there are others which are perhaps less so, including the concept that settlement in an area which is marginal for agriculture could in fact be an advantage. While peat bogs may be viewed only as a source of fuel there is a considerable

body of contemporary evidence to suggest the flora found therein presented a rich resource for grazing animals as well as a source of plants which could be used both for medicinal and other purposes (Gillie 2003, 298), in effect a rich source of seasonal resources which could be as central to an economy as agriculture or fishing and whose exploitation and management might require comparable organisation.

For a society to be successful it requires to adapt to and exploit a wide range of resources and economic niches, of which agriculture is only one and the author would argue the settlement pattern apparent at Uig Bay and Loch Seaforth reflects just such a pattern. The wide variety between one settlement and another suggests that the settlement patterns reflect a wider spectrum of organisation than agriculture and that what we see may be social organisations and farmsteads where agriculture was not the primary concern. Dynamic is perhaps an overused word in settlement studies but it is a useful one to describe the constant founding and abandoning of settlements discussed above. There seems to be little in the standard vocabulary of settlement studies to explain this but the information from the maps suggest that these settlements had a lifespan of between 30 and 50 years – broadly generational – which imply that the social glue which held these settlements together was personal and social ties between the families which founded them. Again, when we consider the social organisation of these settlements, it is consistently the case that the effective running of such a community relies on the relationships and collective organisation between those who comprise the community rather than a system imposed on that community (Ostrom 1990).

The examples presented here show this system at the very end of its lifespan and it is natural to ask how far back it might extend. The listing of sub-groups of tenants within townships which one finds in the 1718 rental for Lewis (Geddes 1949) suggests that we are looking at a system which is well established and a further clue can perhaps be found in the distribution of medieval churches on the island. The distribution of medieval churches can often prove a useful marker for the more elusive medieval settlement (Lelong 2003, 13) and it is instructive that as a rule the medieval and later church sites which must have serviced these communities tend not to be linked to a particular township site but rather offset on the periphery of the general area of settlement. A case in point is Tigh a' Bheannaich, the small stone church to the north of Uig Bay (RCAHMS 1928, 18–19). This tendency for churches to be linked only to a general area of settlement may be a response to the impossibility of founding churches in townships which constantly moved.

It is perhaps inevitable that criticism will be made of the dissonance between the picture presented here and that conventionally produced by the study of rentals and estate documents. As earlier argued such traditional approaches serve an admirable job but they are not tailored towards the needs of the archaeologist. The author would argue that the disparity between rentals and the archaeological evidence reflects the fact that rentals functioned as an overarching fiscal assessment for such settlement patterns rather than concerning themselves with the social minutiae of each settlement. While estate papers can often provide valuable economic information they have tended to mask the true dynamic and driving forces in townships, that of the people whose relations and obligations comprised the very substance from which their society was made.

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