

Survey and excavation at Dunstaffnage Castle, Argyll

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ABSTRACT

Recent investigations at Dunstaffnage, partially funded by Historic Scotland, have provided additional information regarding the castle's constructional history. Excavations have identified features associated with its initial construction in the 13th century and subsequent refurbishment episodes over the following centuries. Additionally, two medieval lime kilns have been located outside of the castle walls associated with these developments. In the 18th century extensive landscaping took place in the immediate environs of the castle as part of the 'improvement' and redevelopment of the site.

INTRODUCTION

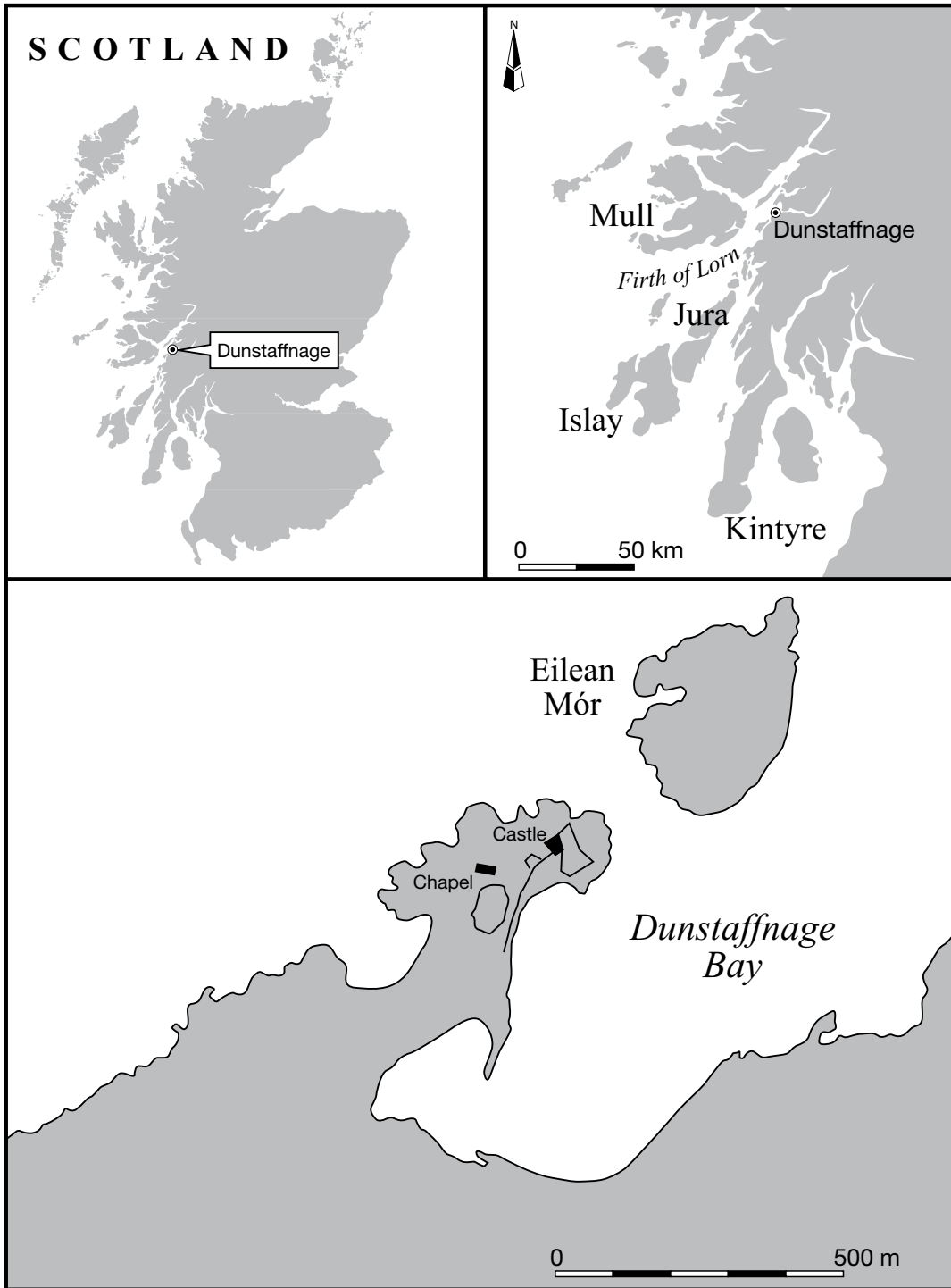
Dunstaffnage Castle stands as an imposing presence on the shores of Argyll overlooking the Firth of Lorn, Loch Etive and the eastern entrance to the Sound of Mull (illus 1). Originally constructed in the 13th century, it played a pivotal role in the political and social life of the region throughout the medieval period and into the 18th century. The castle site has been the subject of historical analysis (Simpson 1958; Millar 1963; Grove 2004) and intensive architectural survey by the RCAHMS (1975). A number of excavations have also taken place at the castle over the past 30 years which have contributed much to our understanding of the site (Lewis 1996; Radley 2000; Stewart 2004). However, much less is known about the site's immediate environs and broader hinterland, as is the case with most castles across Scotland. In 2007

the Centre for Maritime Archaeology at the University of Ulster undertook an integrated landscape survey of the environs of the castle and adjacent 13th-century chapel, as part of a broader research project investigating the archaeology of Gaelic lordship in Ulster and Scotland. This project was partially funded by Historic Scotland. Work undertaken included extensive marine and terrestrial geophysical investigations coupled with conventional archaeological landscape survey. During the course of this work a number of features came to light which warranted further investigation. Funding was subsequently secured from Historic Scotland to conduct limited test trenching across the site and in 2008 five small test trenches were excavated in order to elucidate information on the surviving stratigraphy around the castle and aid both the site's interpretation and future management (Breen 2008).

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ILLUS 1 Location of Dunstaffnage Castle

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The origins of Dunstaffnage are obscure. Place-name and antiquarian evidence suggest it was probably the site of an early medieval dun, possibly one of the central places associated with the Dalriadic sub-kingdom of Loairn. Use in this period may have included an association with the inauguration of the head of the Cenél Loairn. Certainly the ‘staff’ in the place-name has connotations of the rod of authority associated with the Gaelic chiefly inauguration rituals. Tradition also records that the Stone of Destiny was held for a period at the site (Simpson 1958). While this is tentative, the potential linkage of the site with chiefly ascension may lend credence to this association. The discovery of Viking ring copper nearby (S Webb pers comm) may suggest a fair or trading site here. The topography could also have

potentially supported the presence of a beach market but such an assertion requires further study. These activities often accompanied inauguration ceremonies so this may further corroborate an association with inauguration at this site. Nevertheless, the evidence for early medieval occupation at Dunstaffnage remains circumstantial and little direct evidence from this period has so far been recovered.

The peninsula is now dominated by the substantial ruins of Dunstaffnage Castle, originally constructed under the patronage of the Clann Dhubghaill/Clan MacDougall of Argyll. Over the 14th century, the castle fell in to the hands of the Clann MacCailein Mór/Clan Campbell, who continued to embellish it through the following centuries. The date of the original construction of the castle remains obscure. The first historical records of a castle here occur during the first decade



ILLUS 2 Photograph of the south-west elevation of Dunstaffnage Castle and the excavation of Trench 4

of the 14th century, when it was besieged by Robert the Bruce – the MacDougalls having put their weight behind the Comyn family’s support for John Balliol’s claim to the crown (see McDonald 1997: 175–80). However, there appears to be at least two phases of major architectural building at the castle prior to this. Archaeological excavation has continued to struggle to provide sufficient evidence to date either of these phases and dating has had to depend on comparative architectural analysis and historical association.

In its initial phase, Dunstaffnage seems to have been a relatively simple polygonal-enclosure castle. There has been considerable discussion on the date of similar castles in Western Scotland and Ulster (Oram & Stell 2005), with one strand of the debate focusing on an early 13th-century date. A number of lancet windows and arrow-slits are visible within the surviving curtain wall and are also indicative of an early construction date (illus 2).

Duncan MacDougall, the head of the lineage, established Ardochattan Priory around 1230. Whilst he was likely to have had other castles and seats in Argyll, especially around Loch Awe, it seems highly unlikely that he would have patronised a new ecclesiastical centre on Loch Etive without developing a secular powerbase in the area at the same time. If Dunstaffnage was built in the 1220s or 1230s, this would place it within the context of a wider campaign of architectural building as the MacDougalls consolidated their rise to prominence amongst other competing branches of the Clann Somhairle/Clan MacSorley. While the castle was probably built early in the century, a number of alterations were carried out throughout the century. A great hall was added and the corners of the enclosure were demolished and replaced by a number of towers. These

possibly included a donjon and reflected up-to-date thinking on the fashions in castle architecture. Duncan’s son, Ewen McDougall of Lorn, inherited the lordship in 1240s and became effective ruler of the Isles. He was recorded as being in dispute with King Alexander in the late 1240s, leading to a royal invasion of Argyll in 1249. Alexander II demanded that Ewen surrender ‘Biarnaborg ... and three other castles, which he held of King Haakon’, one of which has consistently been interpreted as Dunstaffnage (Duncan & Brown 1957: 208). Despite this episode Ewen was again in allegiance with the King by the 1260s. He now became his chief representative in Argyll, Kintyre and Lorn. The Norwegian King Haakon led an expedition into the area by 1263 but Ewen remained loyal to the Scottish king. Haakon was defeated at Largs and three years later, in 1266, following the Treaty of Perth, the region became part of Scotland (for a fuller discussion of the western seaboard’s social and political context see McDonald 1997; Sellar 2000; Fisher 2005). Alexander MacDougall subsequently married the daughter of John Comyn of Badenoch, creating a political match between the two families. Whilst Fisher (2005: 89) suggested the second phase of construction and change occurred under Ewen’s direction between 1249–63 during the crisis over sovereignty of the Kingdom of the Isles (also see Tabraham 1997: 36), this second phase could equally be attributed to Alexander who was then secure in his possession under the Scottish Crown. The time and resources needed to build the hall and towers and the willingness to weaken the castle during building may point to a safer political, economic and social context for construction.

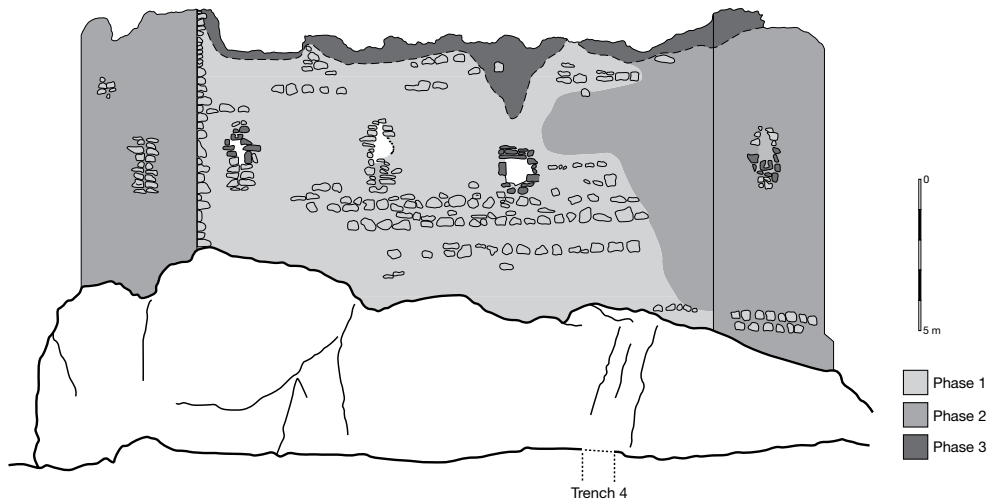
In 1296, the Earl of Menteith was ordered by Edward I to take all of the castles, fortifications, islands and lands of Alexander de Ergadia, son of Ewen, presumably

including both Dunstaffnage and Dunollie (Simpson 1958: 25). In 1308, Bruce targeted Argyll and Lorn; John of Lorn, son of Alexander, reported to Edward II in 1308/09 that he was guarding three castles, presumably Dunstaffnage, Dunollie and Inchconnel, and a Loch (Loch Awe?) with a fleet of galleys against Bruce's approach. Bruce laid siege to Dunstaffnage and overcame it after a short siege while John escaped to the English court. By 1310, the castle was in the possession of King Robert. About 1321, the constabulary lands at Dunstaffnage were granted to Arthur Campbell and the castle afterwards became a Campbell possession with Earl Colin Campbell (Earl of Argyll from 1457/58) adding a new gatehouse at the castle (Boardman 2005: 158). It is unlikely that a significant campaign of building was undertaken at Dunstaffnage after it fell to Bruce and before the gatehouse was added, although repairs may have taken place. Neither Bruce nor the Campbells are likely

to have had either the resources or political will to refortify this monument given that the Campbells took some time to fully establish themselves in Lorn (see Boardman 2000 and 2006).

Subsequent to this, internally, a 16th-century tower house was added, while later in the 18th century (1725) a new house was built against the north-west range. Between 1850 and 1863 the current stone steps leading to the gatehouse external entrance were built (Simpson 1958: 23). The castle complex was subsequently 'restored' at the beginning of the 20th century and is currently in state care.

Whilst we have documentary evidence coupled with supporting archaeological evidence for later building phases so far we have had to remain dependant on architectural comparison and historical surmises, along with some minimal archaeological dating to date the main earlier building phases. Analysis



ILLUS 3 Interpretative south-west elevation showing the general architectural sequencing of the castle's structural development. The earliest surviving phase consisted of the central part of the wall characterised by the lancet windows and large facing stones. Corner towers were later added while larger windows and gun loops were added in the late medieval period. In the 18th century additional refurbishment of the parapet took place

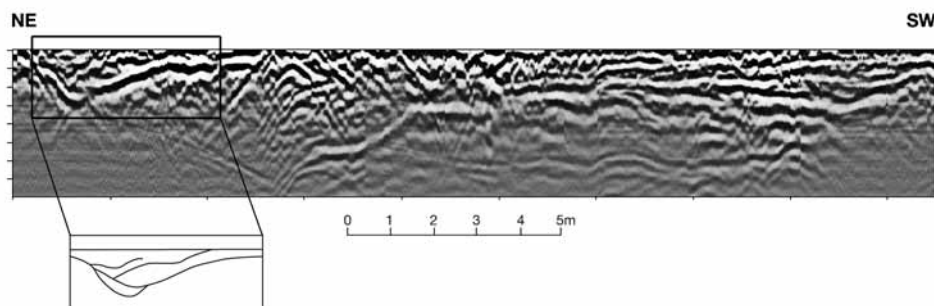
and excavation of what was initially assumed to be features associated with Bruce's siege works have now helped refine the dating still further.

EXCAVATIONS

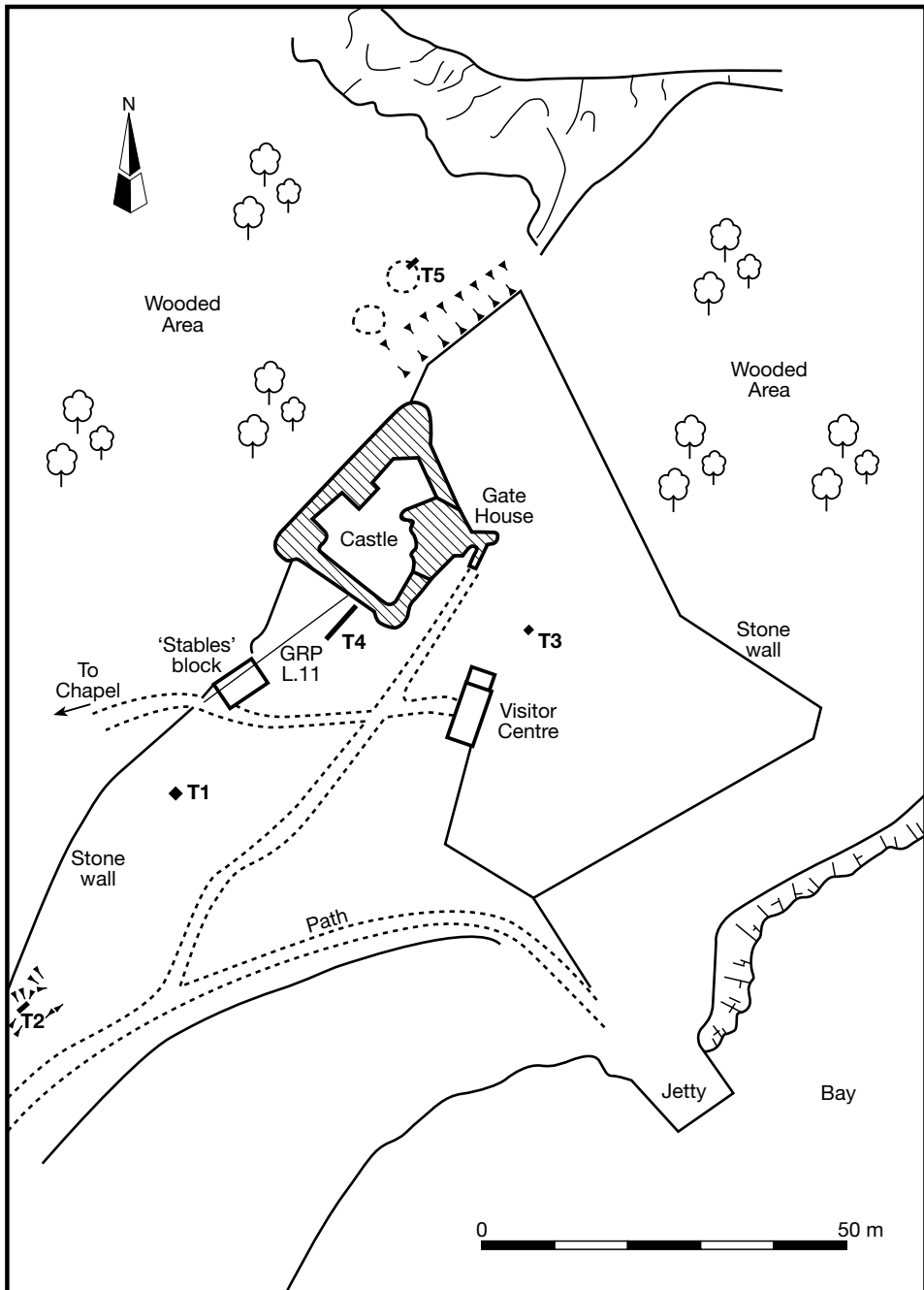
Recent excavations, conducted on the site by John Lewis from 1987–94 and focusing on the north tower and east range at the castle, have shown that the main north tower was an early addition to the curtain wall (Lewis 1996; Tabraham 1997: 36). Aside from slight evidence of Bronze Age activity, three primary phases of activity were identified in the area of excavations: the initial construction of the castle in the 13th century, followed by the building of the north tower and remodelling of the site later in that century. Lewis' identification of a period of rebuilding and construction of the tower was of key interest and tied in with the findings of the 2008 excavations under discussion here. A 13th-century construction date, assigned from the earlier excavations, was based on the architectural sequencing and development of the structure (Lewis 1996). This was supported

by artefactual evidence including the recovery of two Edward I silver pennies, dating to the first two decades of the 14th century, from the one of the subsequent basal infilling deposits that had begun to build up in the tower at end of the 1200s and continued to develop over the following century. A number of decorative mounts of a 14th-century date were also recovered from the same deposit while a ring brooch of a comparative date engraved with a chevron design was found in a similar lower deposit. Architectural details on the south-west wall would also suggest that the castle has been subject to a number of major rebuilds and refurbishment episodes and that both the west tower and the east corner post-date the initial construction phase (illus 3).

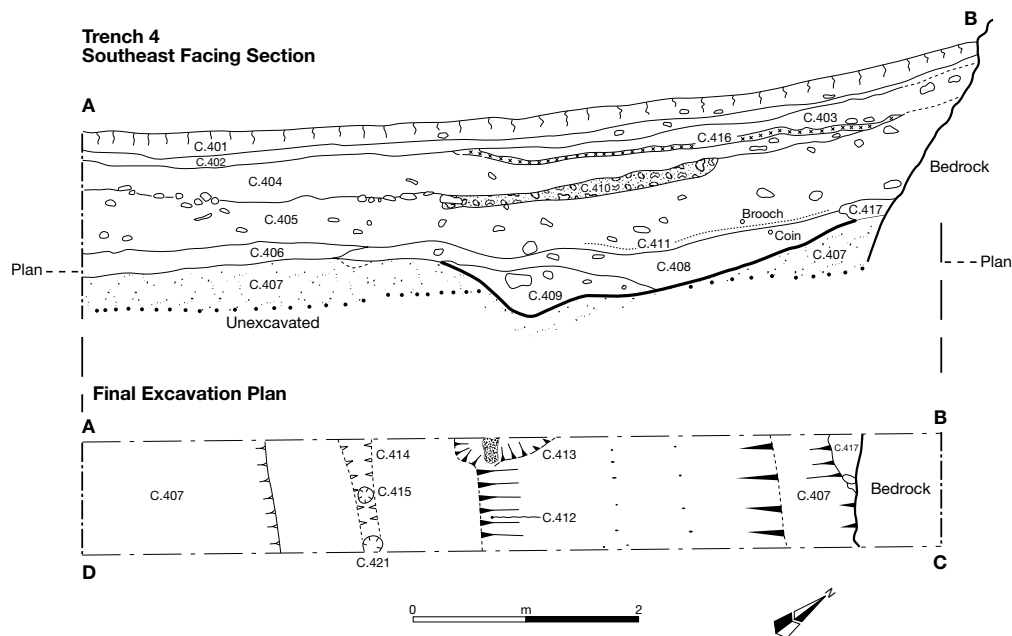
During the course of the 2007 survey undertaken by the authors, a possible V-shaped ditch was identified at various points around the castle (Breen 2008). A number of GPR transects indicated that this was of varying depth and width but averaged 8m wide and c 1.5m deep (illus 4). In 2008 an 8m × 1m trench was positioned against the south-west base of the castle to further investigate this feature (illus 5). The key findings from the trench were a number of horizons associated



ILLUS 4 22.5m long GPR Line 11 running from the castle, across a break of slope and through the interior of the 18th-century building range lying to the south-west. An apparent V- or U-shaped ditch feature was imaged close to the base of the bedrock below the castle to the extreme left of the image. The stratigraphy associated with this feature is interpreted in the underlying box



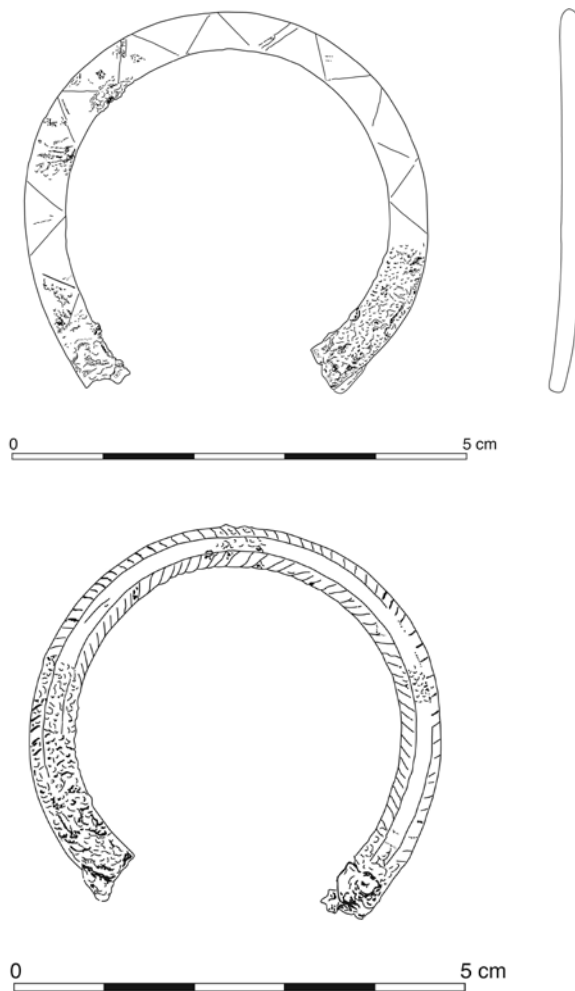
ILLUS 5 Location of Trenches 1-5



ILLUS 6 Final excavation plan and section of Trench 4

with the construction and refurbishment of the castle. While a large defensive ditch was not identified a smaller ditch (context 412) was found at the base of the trench (illus 6). This had been cut into the subsoil (C407) through two original ground surfaces (C417 and C406), consisting in each case of a thin deposit of brown soil. Additionally, C406 contained a number of stones that were possibly deliberately set in the deposit and may have constituted a metallised surface. The limited nature of the excavation trench size, however, meant that no definitive statement could be made on this interpretation. The shallow ditch (C412) was over 4m wide and up to 0.7m in depth and contained a shallow trench (C414) with two stake holes at its base as well as a pit (C413) located at the southern edge of the ditch. The shallow morphology of this feature would indicate that it did not serve a defensive function but was probably

a structural feature associated with the initial construction of the castle. The two stake holes would appear to have been associated with a fence that would have stood at the southern edge of the trench. Following initial construction it is clear that the ditch gradually filled with domestic debris from the castle including animal bone. Additionally, a late 13th-century coin was also found in the upper levels of one of the fills (C408). This has been identified as an Edward I (1272–1307) silver penny, probably from the Berwick-upon-Tweed mint. While these are common finds, the coin is a useful dating indicator that the ditch continued to fill to at least the end of the 13th century. The recovery of this coin also corresponds well with the two recovered by Lewis (1996) in the basal layers of the north tower. The coin in Trench 4 became important stratigraphically as a deposit of clay and a thin layer of a putty-like deposit (C411) was found



ILLUS 7 Drawing of the 14th-century brooch recovered from Trench 4 (Rosemary McConkey)

directly overlying this fill. This type of deposit was clearly associated with a refurbishment or repair episode at the castle that would appear to have taken place at the end of the 13th century or beginning of the 14th. This material would have been used as masonry infill during the building works.

The dating of this episode is relative, provided by the underlying coin and the location of a copper alloy ring brooch found

immediately above this 'putty' deposit in C405 (illus 7). The brooch has a chevron design of plain line triangles and a decoration of closely notched edges on the reverse. A brooch of very similar type with a 'chevron design of alternate plain and line triangles' and five groups of notches on the reverse was found in one of the lower deposits in the north tower and dated provisionally to the 14th century by David Caldwell (Lewis 1996:



ILLUS 8 A post-conservation photograph of the medieval knife recovered from Trench 4 (Wes Forsythe)

581). A second similar brooch with a series of hatched triangles on its front was recovered from a disturbed upper context from Trench 1 in the burial ground next to the chapel on Eilean Mór at Finlaggan on Islay (D Caldwell pers comm). This was provisionally dated to the 14th/15th century.

The succeeding layers within the excavation area consisted largely of domestic dump material that built up against the base of the castle walls throughout the later medieval period. The primary deposit (C405) had a maximum depth of 0.7m and had a noticeable concentration of animal bone at its northern end closest to the castle wall. Interestingly, aside from cattle the deposit also had a quantity of deer bone reflective of the diet and hunting practices of the castle occupants (E Murray pers comm). A medieval single edged whittle tang iron knife was found in one of the fills (C404) with a blade length of 118mm (illus 8). This is not dissimilar to a number of the knives recovered from the Dunadd

excavations where occupation continued into the 13th century (Lane & Campbell 2000) and may have been dumped during a clearance event in the castle interior possibly associated with the construction of the internal house or discarded during a similar construction event. Subsequent deposits continued to build up over this layer in the post-medieval period with finds including glass, bone and stone fragments. A deposit of coal (C 416) at a depth of 0.4m, underlying C403, appears to be an 18th-century deposit, dated by its associated ceramic finds that included Staffordshire slipware and Redware.

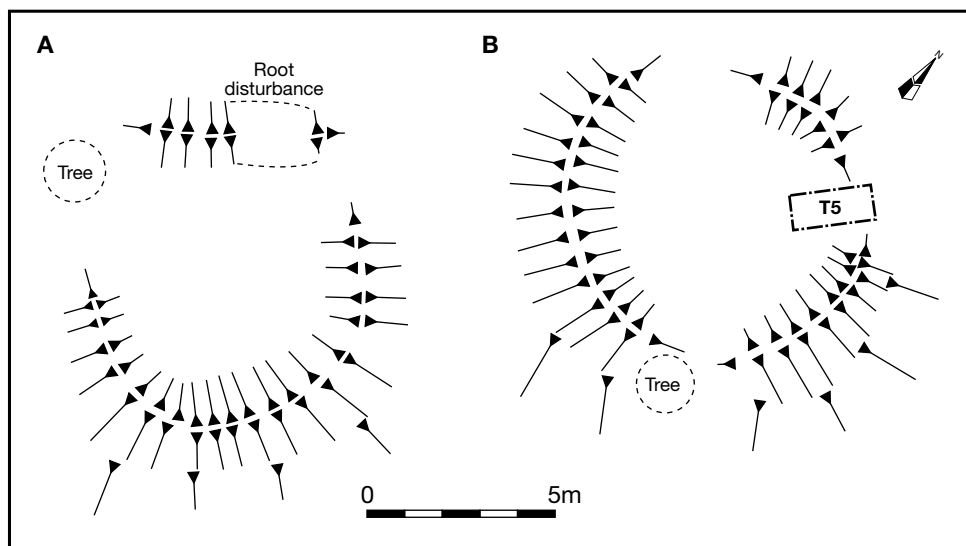
TRENCH 5: LIMEKILNS

During the course of the 2007 survey, two sub-circular features consisting of low banks were located in the woodland less than 10m away from the north-west boundary wall of the castle. Both had approximate dimensions of 9m × 8m but were heavily collapsed

and covered with vegetation. In order to ascertain their morphology and function a 2m × 1m trench (Trench 5) was excavated across feature B (illus 9). The test trench was positioned along the southern edge of the structure through an apparent opening in the wall. Removal of the upper soil deposit (C501) exposed an underlying build up of sediment and stone (C502). This in turn overlay intact stone coursing at the base of a wall with an associated gap probably representing a flue. The underlying context (C504) represented a 0.22m–0.24m deposit of lime with some disturbed charcoal flecking. The trench was not bottomed out due to the depth of the deposits and the loose nature of the overburden and sections. While no finds or dating evidence were recovered it is apparent on structural and comparative grounds that this feature was a lime kiln. The opening in the wall would originally have functioned as one of three possible flues present in the original structure. The positioning and structural similarities between both structures A and B

strongly suggest that both were kilns and their identification adds an important dimension to the castle's adjacent landscape.

However, the dating of the structures remains problematic. No artefactual evidence was recovered from in situ deposits to support a construction date and there is little research on comparative structures across the UK. These were clearly not the substantive raised masonry limekilns that began to appear across the country from the 18th century onwards. Neither do they appear on any of the cartographic or illustrative sources associated with the castle. For example, they are absent from Robert Tennant's 1776 image of the chapel and castle published in his *Tour of Scotland* and are similarly absent from Robert Forsyth's 1808 print *Dunstaffnage Castle*. The RCAHMS archive in Edinburgh holds extensive material relating to the site and nowhere in these sources are the kilns illustrated. It is likely, therefore, that they pre-date the 18th century. Kilns of a medieval date have been excavated previously. One



ILLUS 9 Plan of the kiln structures A and B with the location of Trench 5 shown

example of a probable 13th-century date was investigated in Bedford and was a built using mortared stone blocks with a 5.5m diameter and a number of flues (Baker et al 1979). More recently, West Yorkshire Archaeology Services excavated a probable 16th-century masonry kiln that was 5.7m wide with two opposing flues covered with stone lintels at Ripon, North Yorkshire (Weston 2010). The Dunstaffnage kilns could then be medieval in date but this suggestion awaits future investigation.

Three further test trenches were excavated (illus 5). Trench 1 (2m × 2m) was positioned south-west of the castle over an apparent rectangular-shaped geophysical resistivity anomaly which turned out to be natural geological and geomorphology features. Trench 2 (2m × 1m) was originally positioned in a seemingly artificial hollow, c 4m wide, immediately above the raised beach area and had the potential appearance of a boat shelter or naust. Excavation revealed that shallow deposits remained. Removal of the upper sod (C201) and the lower sediment layer (C202) exposed a stone feature running across the northern edge of the site (C203). This was interpreted as the collapsed wall feature from an 18th-century structure. What was interesting from this trench, and what provided the dating evidence, was the volume of 18th- and early 19th-century material culture, including a decorated drinking glass stem, pot sherds, clay pipe stems and other assorted finds. The ceramics included transfer-printed and willow-pattern wares. Trench 3 (2m × 1m) was positioned over a defined flat rectangular area north-east of the visitor centre and east of the castle which had the appearance of a structure. GPR survey appeared to show the survival of a floor surface at this location. Removal of the upper sod exposed a very thin spread of broken slate, brick and modern early 20th-century white

delft (C 302). This appeared to have been deliberately spread out and levelled during 20th-century landscaping of this area. This overlay a substantial soil deposit, 0.8m deep, consisting of well turned garden soil (C 303). A small number of modern finds came from this deposit. This in turn directly overlay the subsoil. While this trench was disappointing from a cultural structural perspective it did highlight the extent of landscape development and soil deposition surrounding the castle during the early modern period.

DISCUSSION

While these excavations were limited in their nature, they have provided significant insights into the chronological sequence of cultural activity at the castle and provided important information for use in developing future management plans at the site. In particular, the quantification of the depth and nature of the stratigraphy surrounding the castle will be of use in informing future landscape management strategies at the site. The earliest identified feature was a shallow ditch surrounding the castle likely to be associated with construction activity in the 13th century. On the basis of the geophysical survey this was initially interpreted as a defensive ditch surrounding the base of the castle. Excavation clearly showed, however, that it was too shallow to have functioned as such and was instead associated with initial construction activity at the structure. This may have functioned as a slot trench for scaffolding or other constructional support feature. Trench 4 also produced evidence in the form of the clay and putty deposit of a significant refurbishment event at the castle, dated to the early 14th century on the basis of the artefactual material recovered from the excavation. This episode was likely to be associated with repair works

undertaken on the castle walls following the Bruce campaigns. The identification of two kilns adjacent to the castle wall provides further evidence of a building that was subject to continual repair and maintenance. These two structures also remind us that the immediate environs surrounding a castle were not empty spaces but were places of industry, trade, settlement and conflict. These dynamic areas are often ignored in the investigation and interpretation of castles and remind us of the interconnectedness of site and landscape.

Subsequently this area immediately beneath the castle walls was subject to continual dumping of midden material from the wall above. In particular, large quantities of butchered bone from the castle's kitchen and eating areas were deposited here as well as other waste materials and broken or obsolete pieces of material culture. Dumping of this sort continued into the 18th century until the practice was abandoned and the site was subject to landscaping. This marks a fundamental shift in how this site was now to be viewed and corresponds to much broader changes in society associated with improvement, gentrification and landscape change. Internally, a new house was built inside the castle walls while externally, a large amount of riddled, or roughly sieved, soil built up around the walls to facilitate the development of gardens and a later orchard that are known to have been developed here. Trench 3 produced over 0.8m of this garden sediment providing an indication of the extent of soil importation and development that must have taken place in the immediate environs of the site. The discovery of a wall associated with an 18th-century structure in Trench 2 on the southern approach road to the castle may also have functioned as some form of lodge or similar building further adding to the new 'improved' layout of the complex.

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