

# Excavation of a post-medieval settlement at Druim nan Dearcag, and related sites around Loch Olabhat, North Uist

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with a contribution by Ewan Campbell

## ABSTRACT

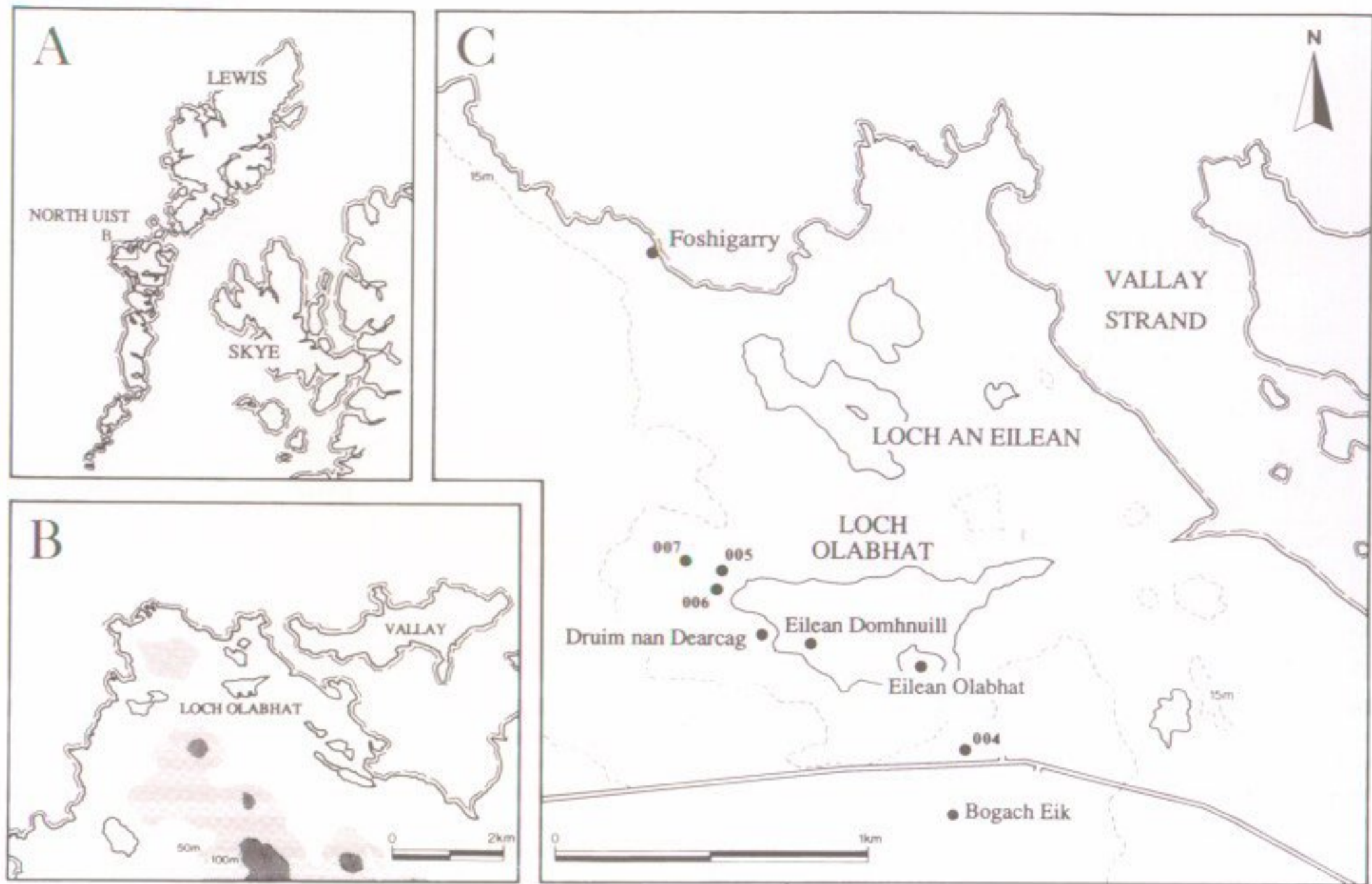
*The loch-side settlement of Druim nan Dearcag has been shown by excavation to date to the 16th–17th centuries AD, when it formed part of a dispersed settlement pattern in north-west North Uist. Elements of this settlement system were subsequently truncated by ridge-and-furrow cultivation associated with the cleared township or 'baile' of Foshigarry. The site produced rare structural and artefactual evidence for this period of Hebridean history and may help shed some light on the development of settlement patterns, house types and land use in the late medieval and post-medieval periods.*

## INTRODUCTION

The small settlement of Druim nan Dearcag (NGR: NF 745 753) lies on the south shore of Loch Olabhat, towards its western end, in the north-western part of North Uist (illus 1 & 2). The main structures, including all those excavated, are set slightly back from the loch, clustered around a gneiss outcrop, less than 100 m from the Neolithic islet site of Eilean Domhnuill (Armit 1992; 1996). The vicinity of the site is now a marshy peat bog, punctuated by occasional rock outcrops and traversed by an 18th-century drove road which passes close to the south of the settlement. The site lies just beyond the range of surviving cultivation remains which cover much of the area between Loch Olabhat and the north coast of North Uist approximately 1 km to the north.

Druim nan Dearcag was identified during field survey in 1985, and excavated during 1988 and 1989, as part of the Loch Olabhat Research Project. The name Druim nan Dearcag (meaning, unlikely as it now seems, 'Hill of the Berries') refers to the adjacent hillock, rather than the settlement itself which has no known traditional name. The site is not recorded in any known documentary sources and was initially considered, in the absence of excavated structural parallels and in view of its close proximity, to be potentially related to the prehistoric occupation of Eilean Domhnuill. Initial excavations were intended to test this possibility (Armit 1988; 1990). The results of both excavation and subsequent survey in the surrounding area, however, suggested

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ILLUS 1 Location map indicating main sites mentioned in text. (Based on the Ordnance Survey map © Crown Copyright)



ILLUS 2 The landscape around Loch Olabhat from close to Site 005: Druim nan Dearcag lies beyond the loch on extreme right, with Eilean Domhnuill in the centre

that Druim nan Dearcag formed part of a string of dispersed settlements, seemingly truncated by the ridge-and-furrow cultivation which radiates from the cleared township of Foshigarry (illus 1). Trial excavations on some of these other sites seemed to confirm their superficial similarity to Druim nan Dearcag.

The artefactual assemblage, principally pottery, suggests a late or post-medieval date for the settlement at Druim nan Dearcag with sporadic, probably casual reuse thereafter; the latter was seemingly related to the presence of the adjacent drove road. This dating, and its implications for the chronology of other relict settlements, raises significant questions regarding the history of land use in North Uist prior to the Clearances, and for the development of the nucleated Hebridean township or 'baile', of which Foshigarry is the nearest example. The insights gained into the development of Hebridean settlement patterns, though initially fortuitous, are particularly timely given the recent reawakening of interest in medieval and later rural settlement (MOLRS) in Scotland generally (Hingley 1993) and in the Hebrides in particular (Dodgson 1993; 1996).

Subsequent survey and documentary research carried out between 1990 and 1996 has enabled the results of the Druim nan Dearcag excavations to be incorporated in a model for the development of later rural settlement in this part of North Uist (with rather wider implications for the Hebrides as a whole) which, while it will be discussed briefly below, will also form the subject of a forthcoming paper (Armit & Dunwell, forthcoming). The present report concentrates on providing an account of the sequence of occupation at Druim nan Dearcag, and a discussion of the buildings, their construction and likely date, and associated finds. It also summarizes the results of trial excavations on a series of similar sites in the Olabhat area, and provides a brief discussion of their significance in the context of both the Olabhat area and wider Hebridean settlement patterns.

Full stratigraphic details of the excavations are contained in an archive report deposited with the National Monuments Record of Scotland (Armit 1997).

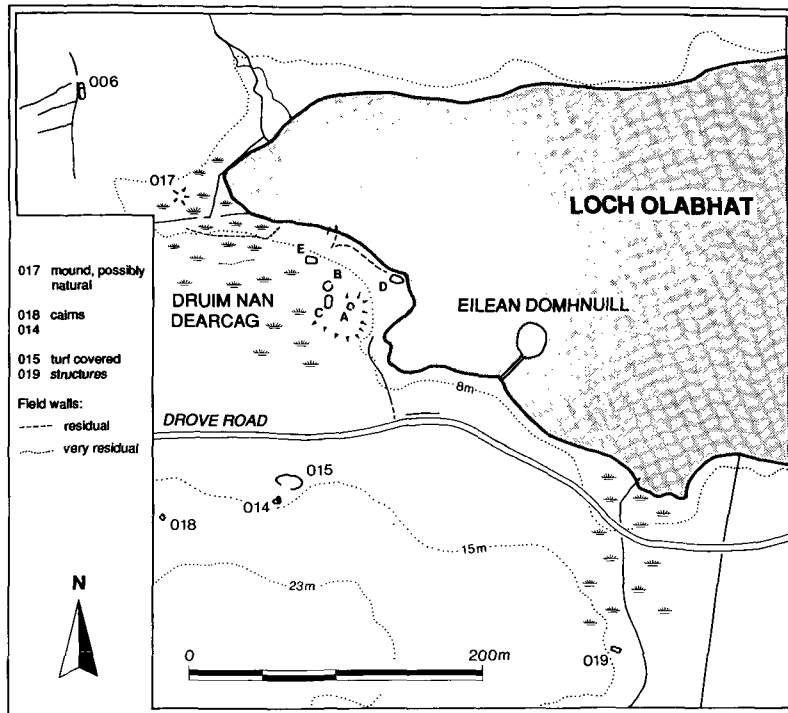
## EXCAVATION RESULTS

The site of Druim nan Dearcag is clearly visible from surface traces as a cluster of five turf- and stone-built structures: two rectilinear and apparently the remains of houses; two annular; and one larger, irregular enclosure (illus 3). All were undergoing severe erosion as a result of intense rabbit burrowing. Excavation concentrated on the best-preserved rectilinear structure, Structure C, and the two annular structures, A and B. Structure E, a badly disturbed rectilinear structure of similar dimensions to C, and the enclosure, Structure D, were planned but not excavated. The excavated structures were backfilled, reinstated and the walls left largely *in situ*.

### STRUCTURE A

Structure A comprised a small, penannular structure, c 4 m in external diameter, on the eastern periphery of the settlement (illus 3). Prior to excavation it had a clearly visible inner wall-face projecting above the turf to c 0.1 m. This defined an internal area of some 2 m by 1.85 m.

Excavation showed that the structure comprised a simple turf and earth bank with no external stonework, but with an internal revetment of small orthostatic slabs (illus 4 & 5). The structure was backed by the rock outcrop on its west side and seems to have been built on an artificially levelled platform, some 0.2 m deep, of apparently lacustrine silt, containing small cobbles, seemingly derived from the nearby loch. The inner wall-face had been raised and levelled by the use of coursed walling above the basal orthostats up



ILLUS 3 Druim nan Dearcag and nearby features

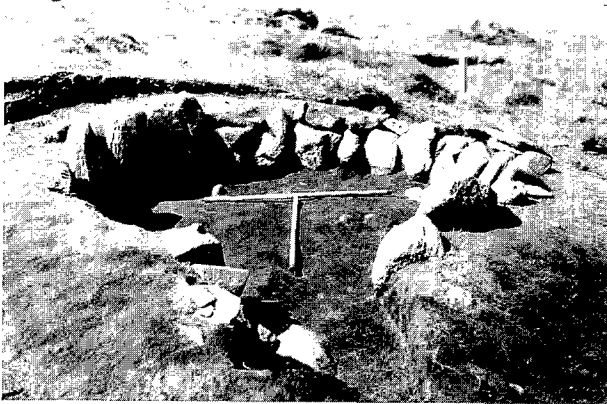
to a total height of c 0.4 m, and does not appear ever to have exceeded this height. The entrance survived as a simple break, 0.3 m wide, in the south-east part of the circuit.

The deposits preserved inside the structure comprised an upper layer of turf and earth some 0.13 m in maximum depth, covering a series of thin, reddish-brown, silty deposits up to 0.1 m in depth, which in turn covered a discrete spread of peat ash, some 0.4 m in diameter by some 0.05 m deep, in the centre of the structure.

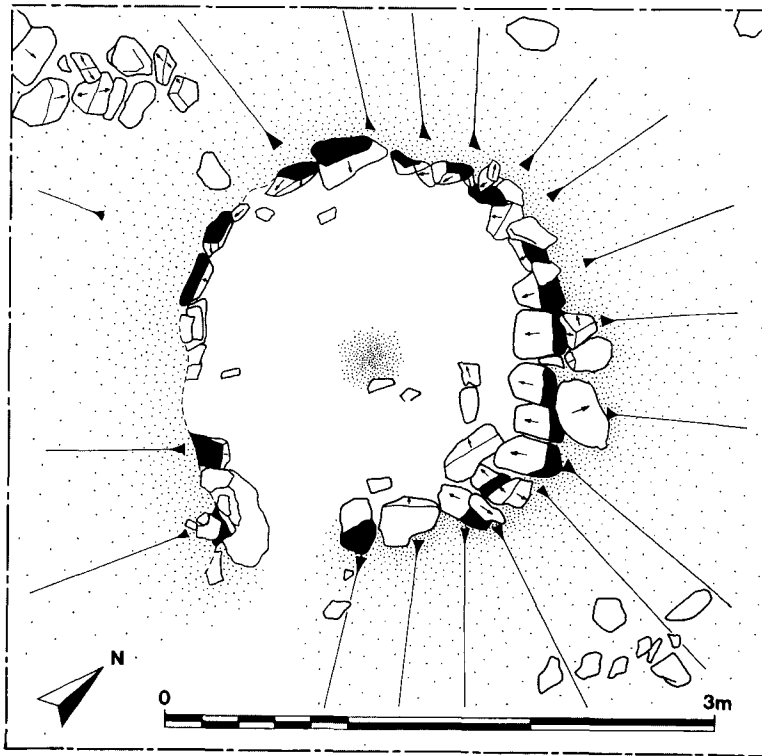
### *Interpretation*

The upper turf and earth fill probably derives either from erosion of the turf bank or the partial remains of a collapsed turf roof. The lower fills are more likely to have accumulated during the use of the building, while the peat ash spread, from its location and composition, appears to represent the remains of an informal central hearth.

It is conceivable that a turf or thatched roof, supported by wooden stakes, could have covered the structure, resting on the wall-head behind the inner revetment. With a pitch of 45° the roof would have had a maximum height of c 1.5 m above the hearth, and much less around the periphery. A flat roof would have required a superstructure of turf founded on the lower stone walls (assuming that access was required), for which there is no evidence. If used for human habitation, therefore, this structure must have formed only a very basic shelter. The hearth, albeit an insubstantial one, suggests domestic use, but this does not preclude an original function as some form of storage building associated with the larger, domestic structures on the site.



ILLUS 4 Structure A fully excavated

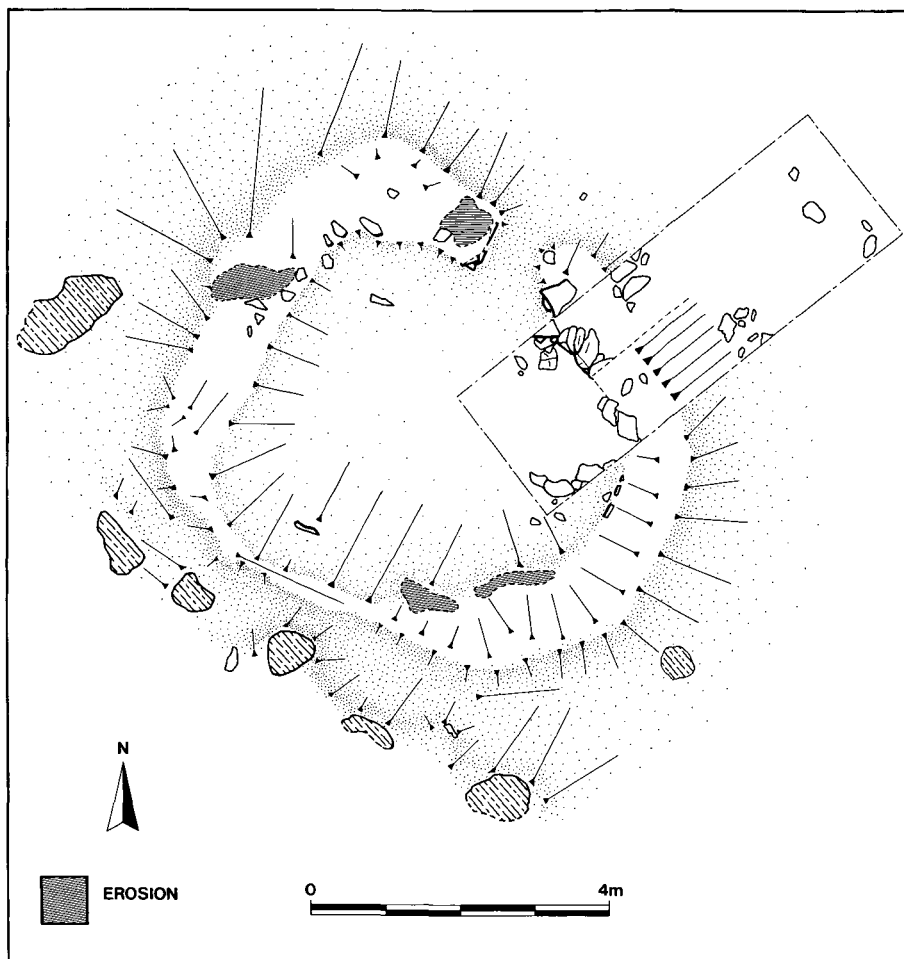


ILLUS 5 Structure A

Around 50 sherds of pottery were recovered from the structure but these derived mostly from contexts formed of re-deposited turf, and cannot provide information on the date or use of the building (see Campbell, below).

#### STRUCTURE B

Structure B is a substantial, penannular structure, measuring some 9.5 m by 7 m externally, set against at the base of the north-facing slope of the rocky outcrop around which the settlement



ILLUS 6 Structure B

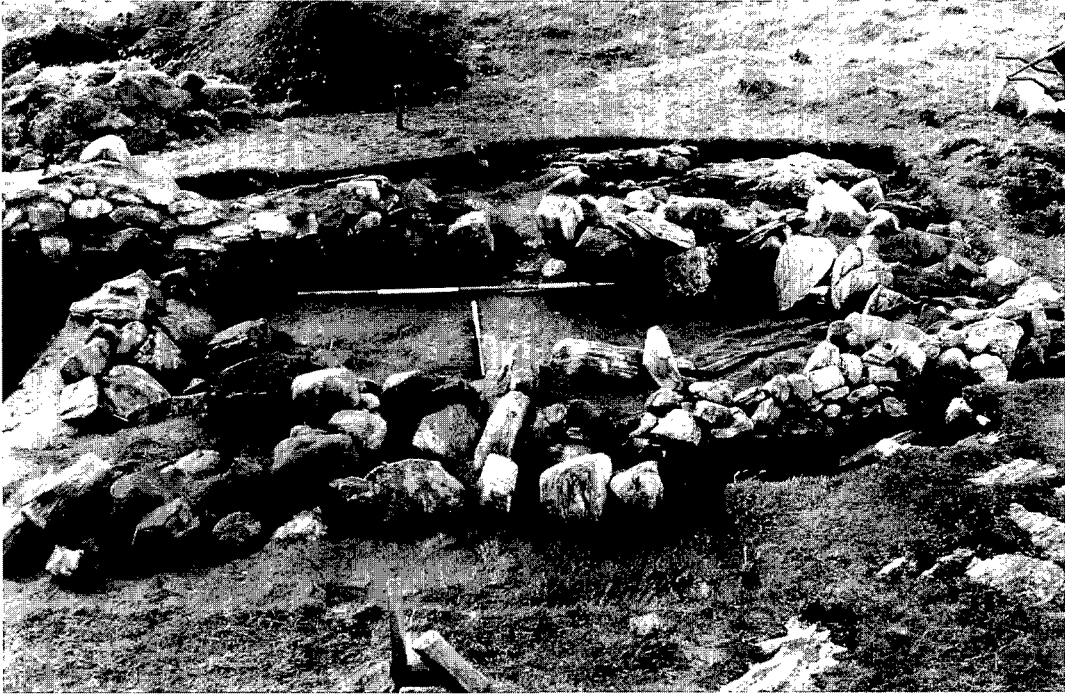
clusters. It clearly incorporated bedrock in its southern walls and was built directly against the rising outcrop on this part of its circuit (illus 6). The structure lies close to the north of Structure C but at a rather lower elevation due to the irregular nature of the outcrop.

A trench cut through the wall and into the interior of Structure B showed that it consisted of a turf platform surmounted by a turf and earth bank, partly revetted by an inner stone wall-face (illus 6). The turf bank survived to a height of approximately 0.8 m, by some 0.35 m wide at its crest. Several episodes of partial collapse were noted, where additional revetting stones had been inserted into the wall-face. The bank deposits were not distinguishable from those of the interior which lay to a depth of up to 0.4 m above glacial till and bedrock with a thin intervening layer of rubble.

The north-east entrance of Structure B was flanked by rather more substantial stone revetments than those of the inner wall-face, but these were not excavated.

### *Interpretation*

The absence of any occupation debris suggests that Structure B was not a domestic building, while the informally revetted turf walls do not appear sufficiently solid to have formed a



ILLUS 7 Structure C from east: primary phase, fully excavated

serviceable stock enclosure. The structure is, therefore, like the rather smaller Structure A, probably best interpreted as a store or outbuilding, contemporary with one or more of the domestic structures on the site. The small quantities of pottery (some 30 sherds) and a chert flake found within the walls and platform cannot be related directly to the use of the building and thus cannot contribute to an assessment of its function.

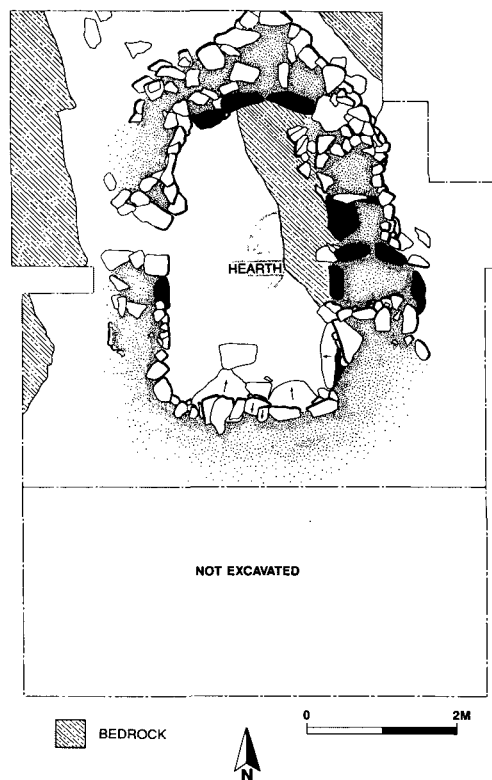
Roofing of this structure could probably have been achieved only by means of a pitched, thatched roof (a turf roof may have required stronger walls), although it remains possible that the structure was never roofed.

#### STRUCTURE C

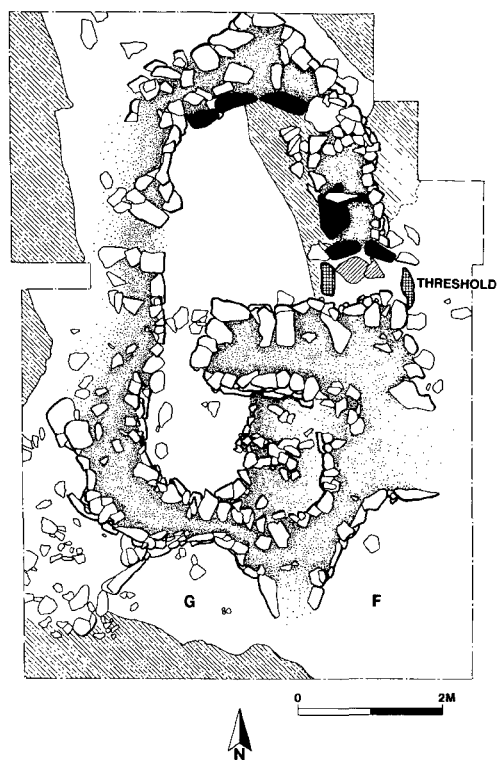
Structure C appeared from surface traces to be a boat-shaped building with a sub-rectangular interior measuring 4 m by 2 m, with external dimensions of 6 m by 4 m (illus 7). Along with Structure A it had suffered the least rabbit damage of the visible structures, although there was some localized disturbance.

Excavation revealed two distinct phases of occupation separated by a major re-modelling of the structure. In its primary phase, Structure C comprised a simple, one-roomed building (illus 7 & 8). The wall varied from approximately 0.8–1.0 m wide and comprised an inner orthostatic revetment with upper coursing to a maximum height of approximately 1 m, a core of turf admixed with midden material, and a low outer, coursed wall. Parts of the wall core, particularly on the east side, were divided into segments by transverse slabs, forming a box-like construction. A simple, narrow gap in the middle of the west wall, lined with orthostats, formed the primary entrance. The structure was founded directly on bedrock and till.

During the primary occupation an informal hearth occupied the centre of the structure, surviving as an unstructured mound of peat ash some 0.2 m in maximum depth (illus 8). A gently sloping gneiss outcrop



ILLUS 8 Structure C: primary occupation



ILLUS 9 Structure C: secondary occupation (including Structures F &amp; G)

formed the floor of the eastern half of the building. A series of ashy deposits, representing the accretion of occupation debris, had accumulated over most of the floor area to the same maximum depth as the hearth, but did not cover the outcrop. No other internal features were noted.

After the deposition of this primary occupation material, Structure C was re-modelled (illus 9). The southern half of the structure was extended and rebuilt while the northern half was retained in broadly its original form. The secondary wall construction abandoned the use of basal orthostats and, instead, coursing was used to build a wall of approximately the same height as that in the northern portion of the building.

A partition wall, overlying and incorporating the original south wall of the primary structure, divided the interior of the rebuilt structure into two small rooms (the northern room measuring some 2.7 m by 2.2 m and the southern 1.5 m by 2.2 m). The eastern half of the smaller, southern room was occupied by a low, revetted rubble platform. The secondary wall overlay layers of fine silty material which had accumulated against the exterior of the primary wall.

The entrance to Structure C in its secondary phase was situated on the eastern wall of the larger, northern compartment, almost directly opposite the primary entrance. The new entrance was paved at a slightly higher level than the interior, with threshold stones at both inner and outer ends formed by the tops of *in situ* orthostats from the primary wall (illus 9). The new entrance was delimited on its south side by the secondary partition wall, while its northern edge was formed by the reuse of two orthostatic slabs built into the core of the original wall. Although only 1 m wide, this entrance was thus rather more substantial than its predecessor, which was now blocked with redeposited wall core material.

Very little occupation debris was associated with the second phase of occupation. What little there was comprised a peaty fill some 0.04 m deep in the central parts of the internal rooms, deepening to 0.14 m towards the walls. This was covered by a mixed, gritty layer some 0.15 m deep indistinguishable from the



wall core material and probably derived from it. There was no sign of a secondary hearth, even though the primary hearth had been covered over during the re-building process. The whole structure was subsequently covered by a thick turf and topsoil deposit.

### *Interpretation*

Structure C appears in both phases to have been a roofed, domestic building, in which occupation focused initially on the small, central hearth. Roofing would presumably have been by turf or thatch over a timber frame supported by the revetted walls. The transverse slabs included in the basal courses may have been intended to provide additional stability for the load-bearing walls: a similar construction was found in parts of the medieval walls of a structure on the nearby Eilean Olabhat (Armit, Campbell & Dunwell, forthcoming).

It is probable that, although the excavated stone wall-footings achieved no great height, upper courses of turf may have raised the level of the roof. The covering of turf and topsoil over the upper occupation layers is best interpreted as the collapsed remains of these upper turf walls and roof. However, it should be borne in mind that the boat-shaped outer wall of the primary structure is both unusual and intriguing, particularly given the essentially rectilinear shape of the interior. In the absence of any other functional explanation for this peculiarity of shape, it is quite possible that the primary building was in fact roofed with an upturned boat.

Aside from the hearth, no internal fittings were identified in the primary phase of occupation. The floor was clearly subject to regular cleaning as no deposits were allowed to build up over the exposed outcrop which formed the eastern part of the floor, and a series of external deposits which butted against the outer walls of the primary building may have originated as hearth sweepings and other domestic refuse. The hearth and other primary internal deposits, as found, may have survived simply because the intention to re-model the building made the cleaning out of the last episode of primary occupation unnecessary.

The length of any gap between the two periods of occupation is difficult to establish from the excavated evidence. The change from orthostatic to coursed walling, and the change in entrance position, might argue for a change in the perception of the nature or purpose of the building, perhaps implying some gap in occupation. The lack of any significant build-up of soil between the two phases, however, and the integrity of the primary hearth under only a shallow covering of material, suggests that the primary structure was not abandoned for any significant length of time and further suggests that the primary roof and walls were dismantled in a controlled fashion rather than being allowed to collapse into the interior. There is certainly nothing in the finds assemblage to argue for a significant gap in occupation.

The secondary phase is presumed to represent a continuation of the domestic occupation although little occupation debris was allowed to accumulate within the building. The division into two rooms represents a fairly radical reorganization of the interior: in the smaller, southern room, a low platform of rubble seems, on the basis with parallels from more recent blackhouses and shielings (Jim Crawford, pers comm), to have formed the foundation for a box bed or similar domestic fitting. A closely similar feature was also identified in the latest (medieval) phase at the nearby site of Eilean Olabhat (Armit, Campbell & Dunwell, forthcoming). The absence of hearth in this secondary occupation may relate either to the regular clearing out of the floor and/or post-depositional factors.

Despite the occurrence of moderately large quantities of pottery in deposits associated with Structure C, the prevalence of turf construction and collapsed turf walls and roofing means that it is seldom possible to unambiguously attribute pottery to specific stratigraphic episodes.

Sufficient pottery did, however, derive from *in situ* occupation deposits (approximately 80 sherds from the primary occupation and 66 from the secondary levels) to reinforce the general impression that the ceramic assemblage changed little throughout the duration of the site's occupation.

#### STRUCTURES F & G

After the final collapse of Structure C, two small, semicircular cells were quarried into its southern bank (illus 9). Neither was visible from surface traces and both were too small to be interpreted as occupied structures. Both had open south-facing sides some 2.5–3 m across and rubble-built walls. Structure G survived up to 0.55 m high where it backed onto the remains of Structure C. Internal deposits associated with these two structures were limited. Both contained a gritty floor deposit some 0.05 m in depth. In Structure G this overlay a dark, silty layer preserved, where it abutted the arc of walling, up to 0.08 m in depth.

#### *Interpretation*

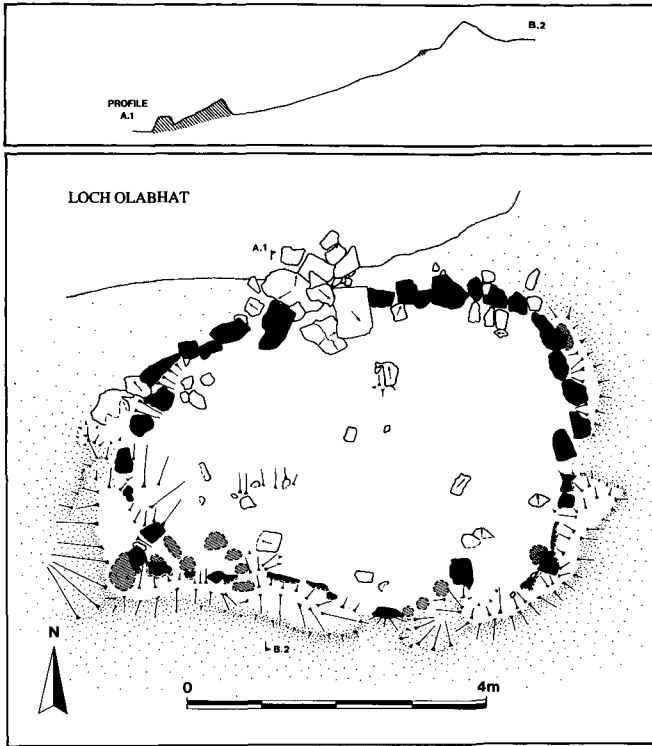
A relatively large amount of pottery (some 70 sherds) was recovered from the small volume of silty deposits within Structure G, possibly reflecting some domestic or storage activity within the cell. Given their small size and rather shabby construction, however, these two structures are probably best interpreted as rough, temporary shelters associated with the adjacent, 18th-century drove road (onto which they face) and post-dating the domestic occupation of the site. A copper-alloy belt buckle, dating probably to the 17th century (although possibly earlier), may date their period of construction and use and perhaps also provide a *terminus ante quem* for the abandonment of Structure C, although it is not securely stratified and its association with these structures is largely circumstantial.

### UNEXCAVATED STRUCTURES

#### STRUCTURE D

Structure D is a stone and turf enclosure lying on the northern margin of the settlement. It comprises an oval enclosure, 12 m east/west by 8 m north/south, formed of massive boulders, similar to those which occur naturally at the loch margins, and with a possible eastern entrance (illus 10). The northern wall lies at the loch edge and utilizes *in situ* natural boulders for part of its circuit, while the southern wall is formed of orthostatic boulders with an outer turf bank, now undergoing severe rabbit erosion. It seems likely that a similar turf bank on the north side has been eroded away by loch action.

The location of this structure is unusual and makes its function difficult to interpret. The ground surface of the enclosure drops by 1.05 m in level from north to south (over a distance of just 8 m) yet it would have been possible to build an structure of equal size on level ground just to the north; thus, so unavailability of flat ground cannot be responsible for its unusual siting. The lochside location and sloping interior might suggest a possible function as a boat noost, but the absence of any direct access to the enclosure from the loch precludes this interpretation. Since the enclosure had a northerly aspect it is not likely that it was used for cultivation of any kind and its function, therefore, remains unknown.



ILLUS 10 Structure D

### STRUCTURE E

Structure E lies to the north-west of Structure C on a gentle north-facing slope which continues down to the loch edge. Although of similar size and overall shape to the latter structure, this building has been badly damaged by rabbits to the extent that its original plan is largely obscured (illus 11).

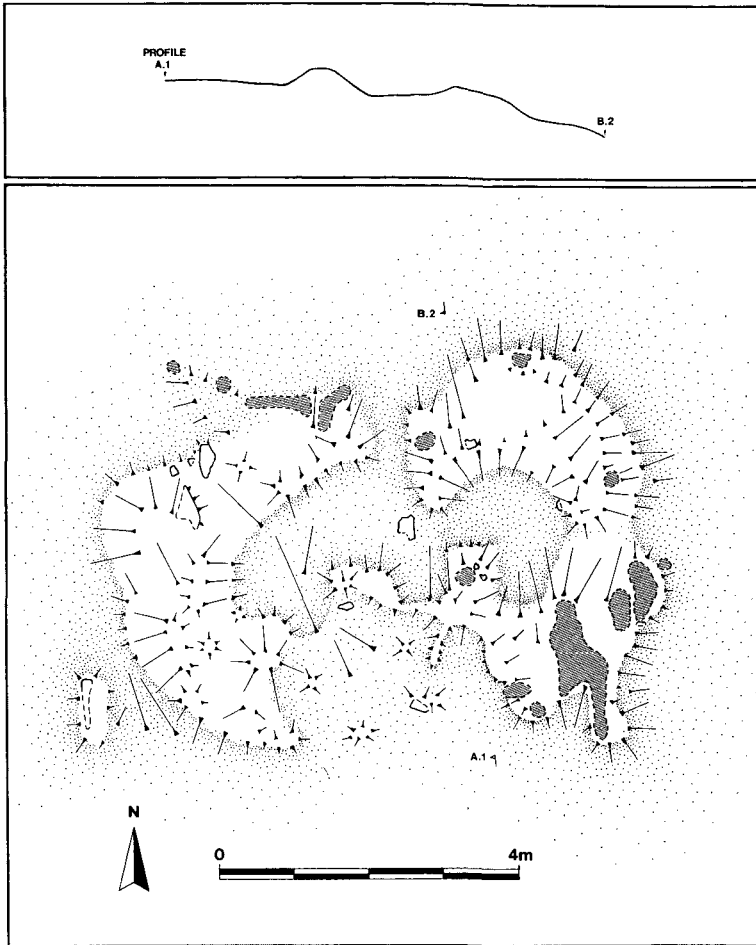
Much of the southern wall has slumped into the interior masking the original form of the building and almost covering a partition wall close to the eastern end. This partition appears to have divided the structure into a larger, western, and a smaller, eastern, compartment, similar to the secondary rebuilding of Structure C. There appear to be the remains of an entrance midway along the northern wall. The plan presented here, however, is simplified from that in the archive report (Armit 1997) and is inevitably, given the degree of damage, an interpretive representation.

### FINDS

#### POTTERY

Ewan Campbell

Some 400 sherds were recovered from stratified contexts, from which around a dozen vessels can be identified on the basis of rim fragments (illus 12). Most of the pottery discussed comes from Structure C, both primary and secondary phases, or from the small, later Structures F and G.



ILLUS 11 Structure E

The following discussion concentrates on local wares, but there were also two sherds of imported vessels of post-medieval date, and one prehistoric (possibly Neolithic) rim sherd from the Structure C rebuild.

**Fabric** In general the fabrics are typical Hebridean gneissic gritty type, not dissimilar to the Iron Age material from Eilean Olabhat some 500 m to the east (Armit, Campbell & Dunwell, forthcoming). The fabric is, however, more varied in its degree of firing, with some being more highly fired than the Iron Age pottery. This is particularly the case in contexts associated with the primary occupation of Structure C. There is one example of a hard black gritty fabric similar to the medieval fabric from Phase 4 at Eilean Olabhat (*ibid*). One vessel has a soft, silty, beige fabric which cannot be paralleled in other Hebridean assemblages, but may nonetheless be a local variant. Two sherds appear to show grass-marked bases.

**Forms** Although no complete profiles can be reconstructed, all of the vessels were globular bodied and bag-shaped with rounded bottoms, as suggested by the lack of base sherds. The forms are closely similar to those of craggan pottery which lasted into the early 20th century in parts of the Western Isles (Cheape 1988,

1994). Both fairly small, thin-walled vessels and larger thicker ones with body diameters up to 300 mm are present. All the rim sherds are broadly similar; simple rims on upright or slightly everted necks, some flat-topped and others rounded.

**Decoration** There appear to be no decorated sherds. One vessel does have fingernail impressions at the base of the neck, but this appears to be accidental.

**Use** Sooting and interior carbonaceous deposits are common, suggesting the use of this pottery for cooking.

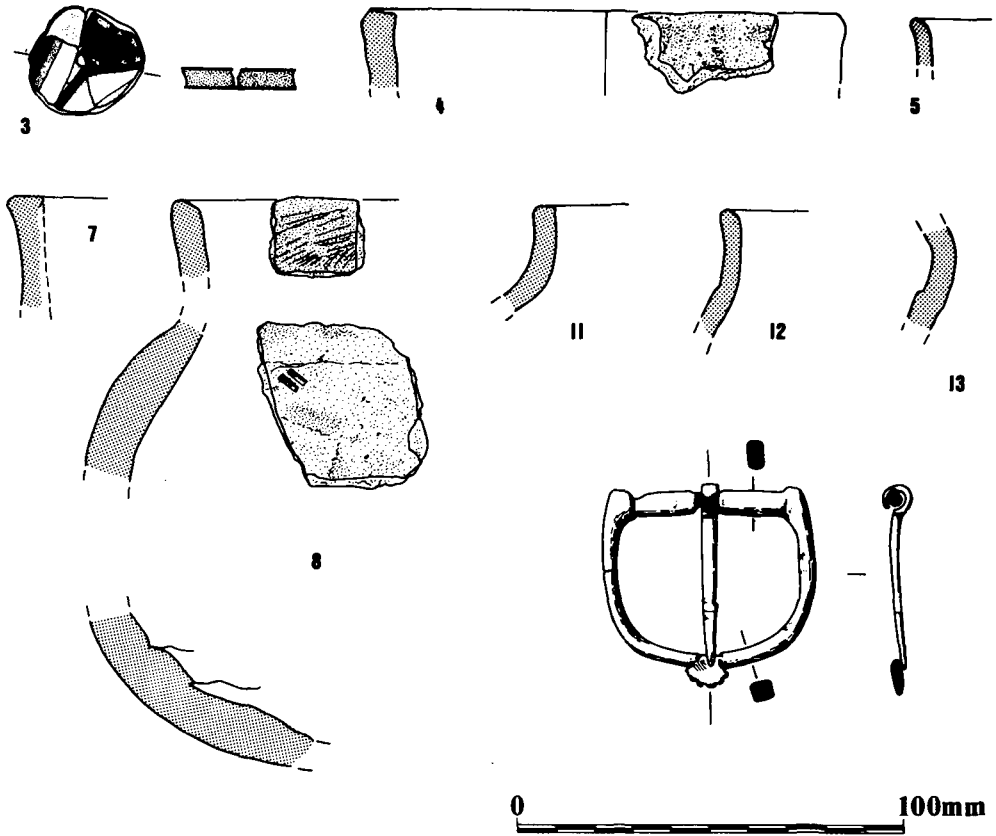
**Dating** In general, the vessel forms indicate a medieval to post-medieval date. There are, however, almost no excavated collections with which to compare assemblages of this date except those from 15th- to 18th-century levels at Breachacha Castle, Coll; and the situation in the southern Hebrides may differ, in any case, from that further north. The lack of decorated vessels similar to those in Phase 4 at Eilean Olabhat suggests that the present assemblage post-dates that occupation, which appears to date from the 13th to 15th century (Armit, Campbell & Dunwell, forthcoming), while at Breachacha Castle decoration is absent only from the 18th-century levels (Turner & Dunbar 1970). The complete lack of 19th-century mass-produced wares is strongly suggestive of the occupation finishing before the 19th century, as these wares are ubiquitous on even the poorest sites of the period. The local wares would thus suggest a tentative date between the 15th to 18th centuries.

However, the imported fine wares may be the key to a more precise dating: the brown-glazed greyware from the primary occupation of Structure C (Cat no 14) is probably of 15th- to 17th-century date, while the tin-glazed delftware from Structure F (Cat no 3), which post-dates the main occupation of the site, could be 16th century but is much more likely to be 17th or 18th century.

### *Discussion*

Although there are some large body sherds from a few occupation deposits (mostly from the secondary occupation of Structure C), much of the pottery comprises small degraded sherds, and some derives from wall fillings. This could potentially complicate the dating of the structures, as some of the pottery need not be contemporary with the structures in which it was found (although presumably still relating to occupation of the site). However, there is some indication that the finds assemblage as a whole belongs to a fairly restricted period, and that the site was not occupied for more than a century or two, probably at some point in the 16th to 17th centuries. First, there is the lack of variation in the assemblage, which seems to have no identifiably earlier or later material. Second, there are many sherds from at least one distinctive vessel (Cat no 8) found in both the primary and secondary occupation of Structure C. While this may indicate disturbance, by rabbits or rebuilding, it is better explained in terms of a fairly short gap between the two phases.

The brown-glazed sherd (Cat no 14) came from the primary occupation of Structure C, and shows that the earliest occupation was probably late medieval. The sherd itself is somewhat worn and, as no other sherds were found, it is possible that it represents material brought from another site at a later date (although the absence of other sherds is also explicable in terms of the evidence for the regular cleaning out of the structures). The delftware sherd comes from a very late context, the fill of Structure G, which seems to post-date actual occupation of the site, and although the context is disturbed, this indicates that occupation did not extend beyond the 18th century. Both the glazed sherds are from fairly high-quality pottery of the sort which might be expected to be



ILLUS 12 Pottery and belt buckle

found on castle or other wealthy sites. Their presence at this lower-status site is unusual and it is possible that they represent vessels which arrived there after lengthy use elsewhere. However, the paucity of excavated low-status sites of this period may equally explain their otherwise restricted distribution.

The presence of grass-marked sherds might once have been taken to indicate some Scandinavian period occupation, at least in the vicinity, but the presence of similar sherds at Eilean Olabhat, in well-stratified Iron Age deposits, suggests that grass-marked pottery is not as a diagnostic characteristic of the Norse period as has been suggested by Lane (1983; 1990).

A combination of the complete lack of decoration in the local pottery, suggesting a later date than Phase 4 at Eilean Olabhat, and the presence in a primary deposit of the brown-glazed greyware sherd, suggests that the site was occupied, perhaps for a relatively brief period, in the 16th or 17th century with casual reuse in the 17th or 18th. In spite of the tentative nature of the dating at present, the assemblage does begin to provide some sort of framework within which to discuss pottery production and use in the post-medieval Western Isles.

### *Pottery catalogue*

Numbers in brackets relate to contexts detailed in archive report (Armit 1997); an asterisk indicates illustrated sherds (illus 12).

*Structure A50: undiagnostic sherds*

- 1 Rim, tiny sherd, rounded top, slightly everted. (A004)

*Structure B28: undiagnostic sherds*

- 2 Rim, upright, bevelled to interior. (B001)

*Structure F10: undiagnostic sherds*

- 3\* Body sherd, cut into a roundel and partially pierced. Probably failed spindle-whorl. Tin-glazed earthenware, with blue painted decoration. Fabric soft, pale creamy yellow. 28 by 27 mm; T 4 mm. (028)

*Structure G68: undiagnostic sherds*

- 4\* Rim upright, flat-topped. D. c 120 mm. (030)
- 5\* Rim, upright, thin, rounded. Small vessel, fine fabric. (030)
- 6 Rim, tiny fragment similar to 4 but smaller. (030)

*Structure C rebuild: 160 undiagnostic sherds*

- 7\* Rim, upright, slightly clubbed to exterior. Just possibly a lid or platter. (041)
- 8\* Rim, shoulder and body sherds of globular vessel with upright neck. Fabric soft, silty, beige. T 11 mm. Body D. 300 mm. (015, 013 and 018 and topsoil)
- 9 Rim, similar to 8, but in gritty fabric. (013)
- 10 Shoulder sherd with fingernail impressions around base of neck.

*Structure C primary occupation: 72 undiagnostic sherds*

- 11\* Rim, upright, flat-topped, globular body. Fabric black, hard, gritty. (052)
- 12\* Rim, upright, thin. (018)
- 13\* Rim and shoulder. Rim rounded, slightly everted, short neck. (018)
- 14 Body-herd. Wheelmade, exterior brown glazed, reduced grey fine fabric. Glaze eroded. T 5 mm. (052)
- 15 Rim, upright. (018)
- 16 Sherd with grass-marked exterior. (018)

METAL

The principal non-ceramic find was a copper-alloy belt-buckle (illus 12) found approximately 300 mm below the turf in the extreme south-east of the excavated area, possibly associated with Structure F. D-shaped buckles are common in the medieval and post-medieval periods, and some, like the Druim nan Dearcag example, have a decorative thickening or pad for the pin to rest on. Despite the absence of exact parallels, a 17th-century date is perhaps most likely for this example, although an earlier date cannot be ruled out (information from David Caldwell, National Museums of Scotland). The buckle was probably either lost during casual reuse of the site after occupation had ceased, or may have been residual from the occupation of the site.

Several pieces of ferrous slag were recovered from deposits within Structure G and Structure C. An unidentifiable ferrous object was also recovered from primary occupation of Structure C.

STONE

One flake of chert was recovered from Structure B. This is likely to have been redeposited, perhaps in the turf used in construction. Similarly, two chert fragments from Structure C probably relate to redeposited wall core material.

## EXCAVATIONS ON RELATED SITES IN THE OLABHAT AREA

Following the initial season of work at Druim nan Dearcag, three further sites (sites 005, 006 & 007), were partly excavated, during 1989, in a field immediately west of Loch Olabhat (illus 14). This boggy field is used now only as rough grazing, but contains the remains of extensive ridge-and-furrow cultivation or lazy-beds. These seem to radiate from the township of Foshigarry to the north, which was cleared in the 1820s.

These sites appeared, from field survey observations, to form part of a relict settlement pattern, of small dispersed groups of stone and turf buildings surviving on the fringes of 19th-century cultivation, which also encompasses Druim nan Dearcag (Armit & Dunwell, forthcoming). All had been severely damaged by rabbit burrowing. The excavations were carried out to provide structural and dating evidence for these sites and to examine their possible relationship with the Druim nan Dearcag.

## SITE 005

This site, to the west of Loch Olabhat, has been truncated by rabbit burrowing, to the extent that only the northern stump of the original building is left. It had a probable original width of c 4.5–5 m and its original length is unknown. Work on this site comprised the planning of surface features and the recording of the eroded section through the structure (Armit 1997). This provided evidence of a turf-cored wall with low stone facing, similar to those at Druim nan Dearcag, although no clear evidence of internal occupation was recorded. Finds were restricted to two undiagnostic pottery sherds and a heavily corroded iron pin.

## SITE 006

This site, which has also suffered severe damage from rabbit burrowing, lies on high ground to the west of Loch Olabhat and immediately east of the remains of lazy-beds which occupy most of that area.

The principal structure is a rectilinear building, measuring some 7.5 m north/south by 4.5 m east/west (illus 13). Damage from rabbit burrowing was too severe to enable any reliable determination of the size, shape or configuration of the interior. A U-shaped structure, approximately 4 m east/west by 3.5 m deep, and open to the north, was appended to the north end of the structure.

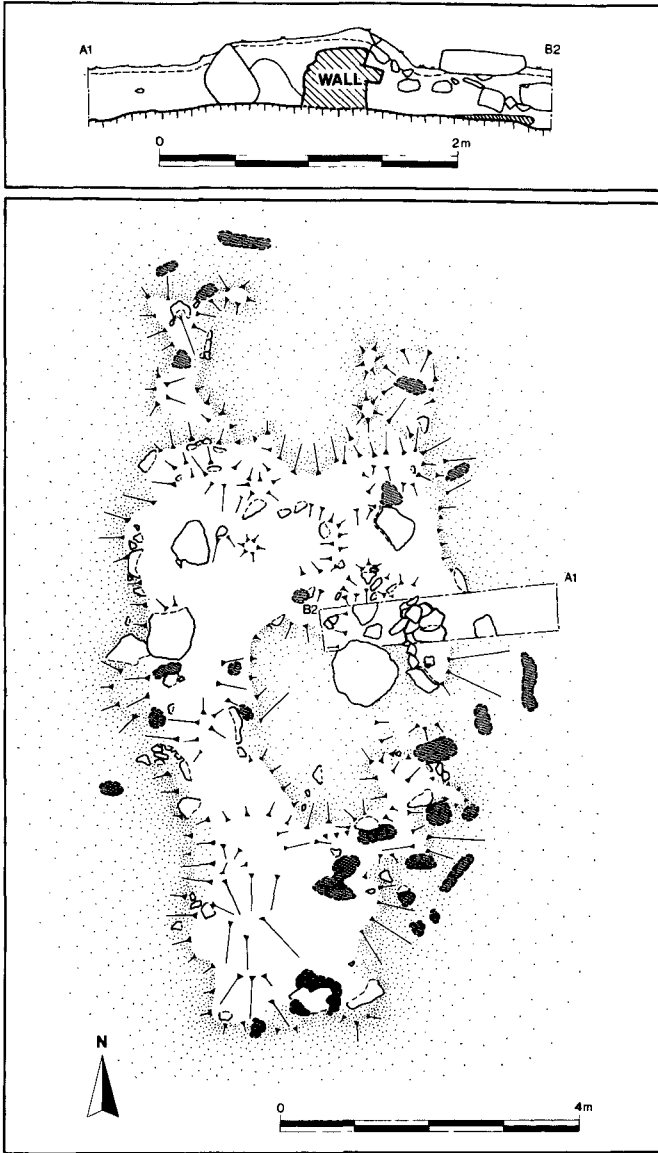
A trench through the relatively well-preserved east wall demonstrated that the wall construction was similar to that of Druim nan Dearcag Structure C and Site 005, comprising stone facing of a turf-earth core, surviving to some 0.4 m high. The internal deposits, however, were far richer, in terms of occupation debris, than at either of the other sites, although the small area excavated meant that artefactual material recovered was restricted to a few undiagnostic pot-sherds. A depth of 0.3 m of occupation debris was identified against the east wall including quantities of peat ash and charcoal.

Geophysical survey and a subsequent trial trench also identified three parallel linear stone features close to this structure (illus 14), which had been truncated by the surrounding lazy-beds. These appear to represent linear stone clearance features, spread to 3–4 m in width and with minimal preserved relief, perhaps originally associated with agriculture around Site 006. Two fragments of field boundary walls, possibly associated with Site 006 and truncated by the later lazy-beds, were also identified but not excavated (illus 14).

## SITE 007

The cultivation rigs in the field below Ariard can be seen to pass across a subcircular 'platform' (illus 14), where a number of large stones lie in the furrows as if cleared from a pre-existing structure. Removal of the turf and upper, cultivated soil from part of the platform exposed a small clearance cairn. Underneath were indications of a truncated, linear stone feature set into a buried soil. Elsewhere the cultivated soil directly





ILLUS 13 Site 006

overlay till. The site is probably related to an episode of cultivation possibly associated with similar remains exposed at site S006. Whatever its interpretation, it clearly shows an element of time-depth within the area of ridge and furrow cultivation.

#### OTHER SITES AROUND LOCH OLABHAT

Besides the sites already discussed, three other sites in the vicinity of Loch Olabhat may pertain to the same dispersed settlement pattern (illus 14).

- 1 The latest phase of settlement on the promontory of Eilean Olabhat appears to date to the 13th–15th centuries and comprises two rectilinear structures similar in construction to Structure C at Druim nan Dearcag (Armit, Campbell & Dunwell, forthcoming).
- 2 Site 004 is located in peat bog to the south of Loch Olabhat beside the modern road (illus 14). It appears to be an isolated structure, although the construction of the road may have destroyed accompanying buildings. The structure comprises a sub-circular turf or peat bank approximately 1 m in width, with an external diameter of 5–6 m, and is similar in size and form to Structure B at Druim nan Dearcag. Gaps on both east and west may represent entrances. Probing of the structure revealed no indication of stone, although the peat may have covered the structure to a considerable depth.
- 3 A further settlement in this group was discovered by field survey in 1995 on the south side of the modern road in boggy peatland on the fringes of the Bogach Eik, a bog extensively exploited for peat (illus 1 & 14). This comprises two probable rectilinear structures similar to those at Druim nan Dearcag and associated annular structures (Armit & Dunwell, forthcoming).

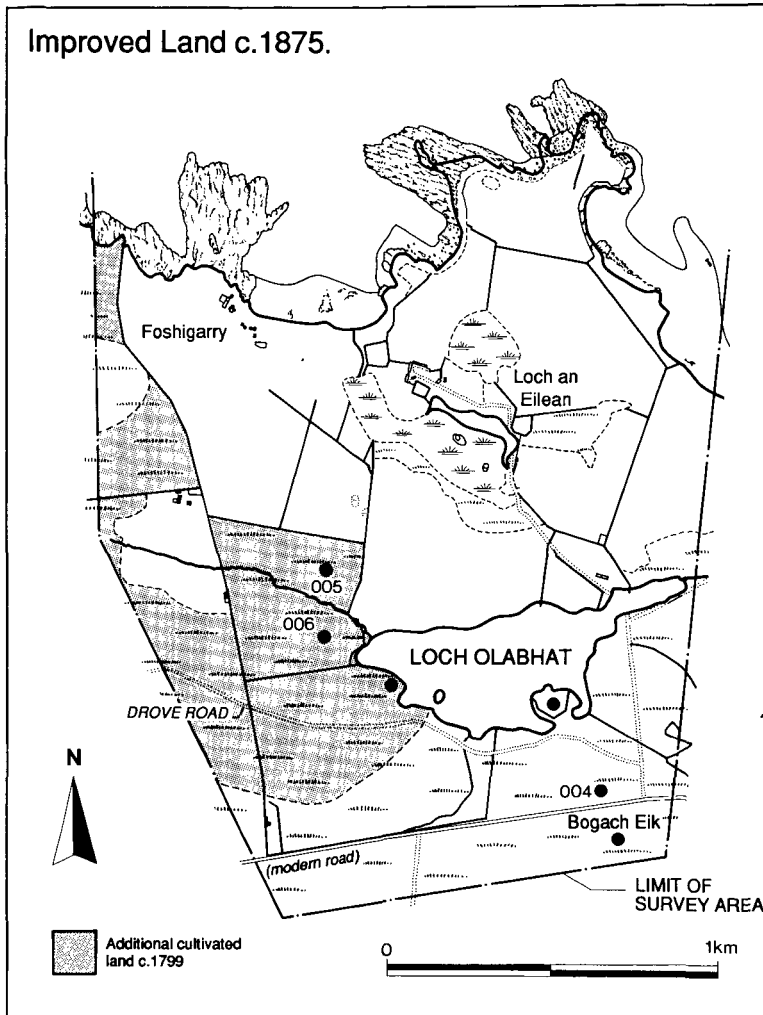
## DISCUSSION

The settlement at Druim nan Dearcag appears to have comprised two houses (Structures C & E), two storage buildings (A & B) and an enclosure (D). That there were at least two phases of occupation is shown by the re-modelling of Structure C, but there may, of course, have been more: it is unclear, for example, whether the two houses were ever occupied at one time. The pottery, however, suggests that the overall occupation of the excavated parts of the site was relatively short-lived, and confined in date to the 16th–17th centuries, with only casual reuse thereafter.

In terms of the wider political scene, the occupation of Druim nan Dearcag and, by implication, the settlement pattern with which it was associated, appears to date to the period following the terminal decline of the Lordship of the Isles; this was forfeited in 1493, and effectively ended with the death of the last serious claimant in 1545. The occupation of the site thus lies in a period of great social and economic change in the islands.

The study of social change in the late and post-medieval period in the Hebrides is closely bound up with the study of the development of the Hebridean baile: the nucleated settlement form that appears to characterize the settlement landscapes of the Western Isles once written records become more plentiful in the late 18th century. Dodghson (1993) has suggested that the nucleated baile, far from being a highly conservative settlement form with an ancestry stretching back to the Norse period or earlier, may have emerged relatively late in the west Highlands — perhaps from the 13th century onwards, in association with the introduction of runrig or open-field agricultural systems. In some areas this process may even have been incomplete in the 18th century (*ibid*, 425). Dodghson has further suggested, on the basis of both documentary and field survey evidence, that settlement before the nucleated baile might have comprised scatters of dispersed farmsteads associated with enclosed fields, examples of which may be represented by surface traces at Bragar in Lewis and Greaulin in Skye (*ibid*). Druim nan Dearcag would appear to represent the first excavated evidence in support of these ideas, and further appears to suggest that the nucleation of settlement at Foshigarry may not have taken place much, if at all, before the 18th century.

There is virtually no evidence from the excavation relating to the economy of the site due to the lack of survival of bone or other palaeo-environmental material, although areas of midden may yet survive in unexcavated parts of the site. The absence of surface traces of associated fields, rigs or clearance heaps suggests a predominantly pastoral function for the site although the



ILLUS 14 The area around Loch Olabhat showing areas cultivated c 1875 as unshaded (based on Ordnance Survey 1st edn). Shaded areas represent land cultivated c 1799 but out of cultivation by 1875 (from Robert Reid map of North Uist, 1799)

residual survival of linear clearance cairns and walls at Site 006 suggests that their absence elsewhere may be a product of later destruction or masking by peat growth.

The layout of the settlement at Druim nan Dearcag, although fitting into the pattern of broadly similar settlements in the area around Loch Olabhat, has its closest recorded parallels on a site at Clibhe in Lewis (Armit 1994, site 47). At the latter site, a rectilinear structure, closely similar to Structures C and E at Druim nan Dearcag, is located on a knoll overlooking Traigh Clibhe, and associated with a number of small annular turf platforms. Like Druim nan Dearcag, this site escapes mention in the surviving documentary sources and may, therefore, also relate to

late medieval occupation. Similar sites are presumably widespread in the Western Isles but will only be identified by the wider application of intensive field survey, particularly in areas which have, for one reason or another, escaped intensive later cultivation.

It could be suggested that Druim nan Dearcag and the other sites discussed represent some form of shieling. After all, the relatively substantial nature of the buildings (relative, at any rate, to the tiny dry-stone bothies and shelters found elsewhere in the islands in the rough pastures most likely to have formed shieling grounds), the evidence for hearths, the use of pottery, and cooking, are not incompatible with the idea of transhumant settlement, as recent studies of shielings in both Skye (Roger Miket, pers comm) and, on the mainland, at Ben Lawers in Perthshire (John Atkinson, pers comm), have begun to show.

Perhaps the strongest evidence against the shieling interpretation, however, is the nature and siting of the settlement distribution of which Druim nan Dearcag forms a part. This settlement pattern appears to consist of small, regularly sited, settlements occupying locations which, although set back from the coast, are by no means outwith the area of formerly cultivable land. The settlement pattern is truncated to the north-west by cultivation remains associated with Foshigarry and, to the south, any continuation is obscured by peat growth. The sites are, therefore, confined by virtue of factors of archaeological visibility, to an island of preservation on the fringes of the present blanket peat. This is clearly not land likely to have been given over to shielings, and the regular spacing of the settlements within formerly cultivable land is more suggestive of a settled landscape of discrete farming settlements. Even if these areas were used at some time for seasonal activities, it seems most improbable that anything more than simple shelters would have been required so close to the main areas of permanent settlement. Shieling settlements do exist in North Uist and neighbouring islands, but these tend to be set some distance from the coastal machair, on the flanks of the low hills that occupy the central part of the island.

The original extent of this dispersed settlement distribution remains unknown, but its existence does have clear implications both for the development of the Hebridean baile, particularly with reference to the issues discussed by Dodghson (1993; 1996) and for the ancestry of vernacular buildings in the islands. These issues, however, will be considered in a separate paper in which rather fuller consideration can be given to the social and historical context of the archaeological landscape of North Uist (Armit & Dunwell, forthcoming).

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