

3. DATING DUNS IN ARGYLL

The dun sites at Barnluasgan (Canmore ID [39168](#)) and Balure (Canmore ID [290103](#)) are two of over 300 sites classified as duns in Argyll, the majority situated in coastal locations in the west and north of the area (Illus 2).

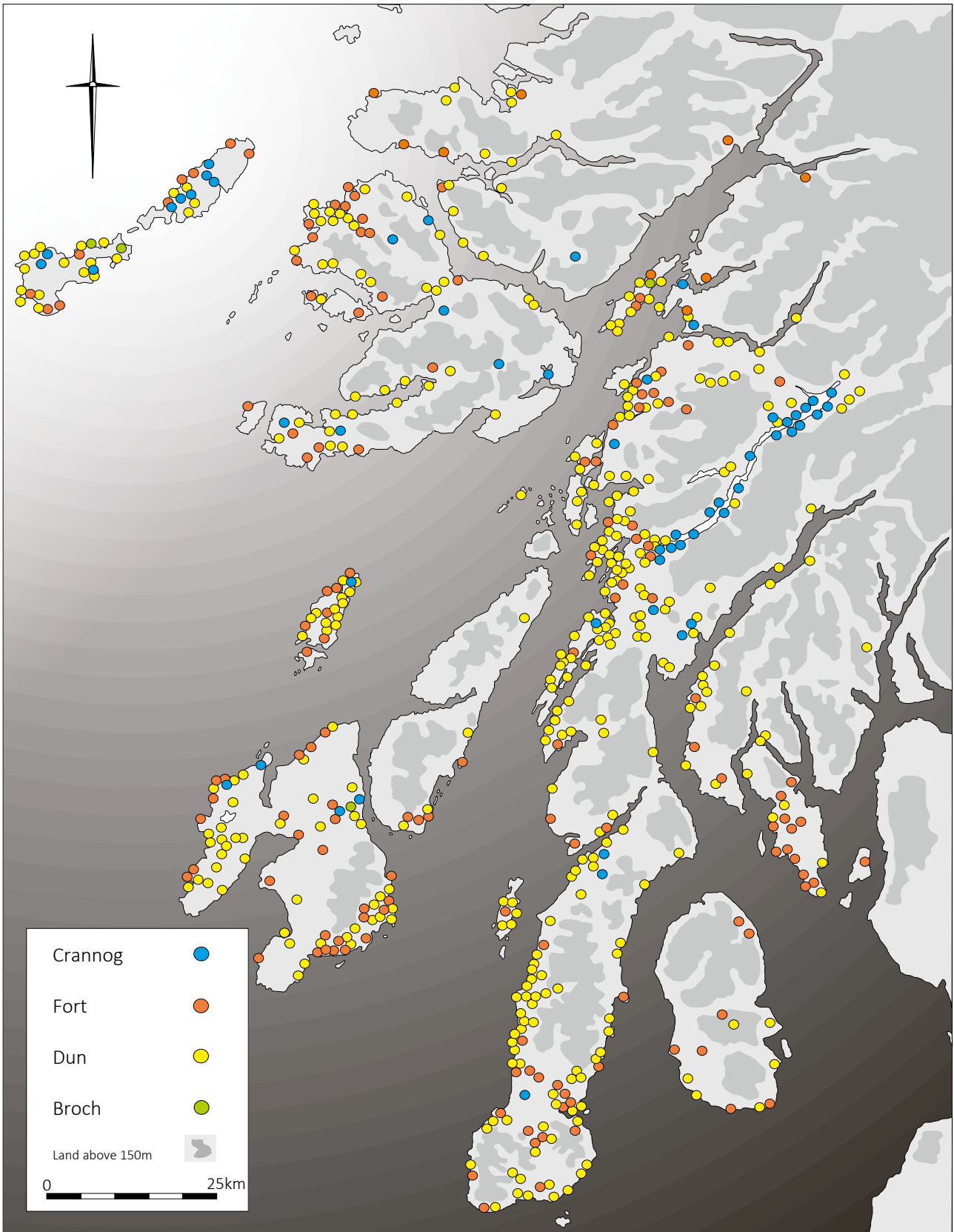
Across Argyll 34 sites classified as duns have previously undergone some degree of excavation, but prior to this work only two had associated radiocarbon dates. The dun at Kildonan Bay (Canmore ID [38756](#)) was revisited after its initial excavation specifically to obtain radiocarbon dates, which indicated occupation between cal AD 610 and 1020 and were reinforced by the few diagnostic finds from the original excavations (Peltenburg & Hood 1979; Peltenburg et al 1984). Roman pottery and locally produced Iron Age ware was also recovered, indicating that the dun, as suggested in the original published report, 'may have been built before the second century AD' (Fairhurst 1939). More recently, the dun at Loch Glashan (Canmore ID [40067](#)) has produced dates between the 4th and 1st centuries BC (Henderson & Gilmour 2011: table 1).

The dating of other dun sites relies on associated finds derived from excavation. A 4th–3rd-century BC date was postulated for the occupation of the vitrified dun at Rahoy (Canmore ID [22470](#)), this based on the recovery of a looped and socketed iron axehead and part of a La Tène bronze brooch, this relatively early date perhaps underlined by the recovery of saddle querns (Childe & Thorneycroft 1938). This date, however, has to be treated with some caution given the excavation techniques (including explosives) used in the excavation. A saddle quern was also recovered from the excavation of Clachan Ard (Canmore ID [40269](#)), on Bute, which might also suggest an occupation date before the 3rd century BC (Marshall 1934). A comb fragment recovered from Dun Scalpsie (Canmore ID [40254](#)) might indicate a similar date if the suggested parallels are proven to be correct (MacCallum 1959, 1963).

As at Kildonan, the recovery of datable Roman artefacts often provides the only diagnostic material to date the occupation of dun sites. At Kildalloig, Glenramskill (Canmore ID [38708](#)), for example, the recovery of a bronze fibula and a spiral ring date some occupation of the site to the 1st/2nd century AD

(Bigwood 1964). The Roman pottery, ring-headed pin and strap end from Dun an Fheurain (Canmore ID [22954](#)) were examined some time after the initial excavations (Anderson 1895; Ritchie 1974). The finds derived from a midden below the dun and as such do not directly date the structural remains, although they indicate occupation from the 1st–2nd century AD to the middle of the 1st millennium AD. Roman pottery has also been recovered from Ardifuir (Canmore ID [39140](#)) and Dun Fhinn (Canmore ID [38467](#)), which suggests a date of construction prior to the 2nd century AD (Christison et al 1905; Bigwood 1964). The excavation at Dun Fhinn also produced a glass toggle bead and similar beads have also been recovered from the dun at Ronachan Bay (Peltenburg 1979) (Canmore ID [38964](#)), and the fort at Dunagoil (Harding 2004b) (Canmore ID [40291](#)), and the significance of these will be discussed below. A ring-headed pin recovered from Dun Beag Vaul (Canmore ID [21527](#)) perhaps suggests a date before the 4th century AD, as does the recovery of decorated Hebridean pottery (MacKie 1963). Decorated pottery has been recovered from excavations on Dun Nighean (Canmore ID [21450](#)) and Dun na Cleite (Canmore ID [21412](#)) on Tiree, while finds of similar decorated pottery have been recovered from An Dunan (Canmore ID [21501](#)) and Dun Beag (Canmore ID [21495](#)) also on Tiree, along with Dun Beic (Canmore ID [21571](#)) and Dun an Achaidh (Canmore ID [21587](#)) both on Coll (Piggott 1951; Holley 1994a, 1994b, 1996a, 1996b).

The recovery of coarse undecorated pottery from Dunan nan Nighean (Canmore ID [38209](#)) on Colonsay led Piggott to suggest an occupation date of 'the last century BC or early centuries AD' (Piggott 1951), but it is notoriously difficult to date undecorated handmade pottery in Scotland, as similar wares have been produced from prehistoric through to modern times. Small quantities of undecorated pottery have also been recovered from several dun sites, namely Ardifuir, Leccamore South (Canmore ID [22629](#)), Kildalloig, Kildonan, Dun Aorain (Canmore ID [22613](#)), Dun Cul Bhuirg (Canmore ID [21638](#)), An Caisteal (Canmore ID [21757](#)), Dun Mhic Choigil (Canmore ID [38479](#)) and Dunadd (Canmore ID [39564](#)) (MacNaughton 1891, 1893; Fairhurst 1939; Bigwood 1964; Hedges & Hedges 1977; Lane & Campbell 2000). The



Illus 2 Distribution of duns, forts, brochs and crannogs in Argyll. (Image by Roddy Regan, © Kilmartin Museum)

duns at An Caisteal and Leccamore also produced rotary querns, which have also been recovered from a number of other sites – Torr a' Chaisteil (Canmore ID [21774](#)), Druim an Duin (Canmore ID [39160](#)), Dun Chroisprig (Canmore ID [37467](#)) and An Dun (Canmore ID [23201](#)) – and suggest occupation after their introduction some time in the latter half of the 1st millennium BC, but their use is a long one and without further dating evidence they cannot firmly place any of these sites in the Iron Age (McArthur 1873; Christison et al 1905; Newall 1966; Betts 1969). The excavation on Dun Breac (Canmore ID [39290](#)) produced iron slag and a few stone objects but no datable artefacts, while that at Suidhe Chennaidh (Canmore ID [23466](#)) produced only bones and charcoal (Christison 1891; Graham 1915). Similarly, excavations at Kingcross (Canmore ID [40075](#)) and Eilean Buidhe (Canmore ID [40458](#)) along with smaller evaluations at Laganreure (Canmore ID [290104](#)) and Castle Dounie (Canmore ID [39164](#)) failed to produce readily datable artefacts (Balfour 1910: 182–5; Maxwell 1941; Regan 2006; Regan 2011).

The recovered artefacts from the dun at Ugadale (Canmore ID [38760](#)) indicate occupation of the site from the 8th century AD and perhaps sporadically into the late medieval period, although as the excavator pointed out the investigations were limited in nature and produced no firm dates for the actual construction of the dun (Fairhurst 1956). Similarly, the early medieval artefacts recovered from Dunollie (Canmore ID [23027](#)) and Eilean Rìgh I (Canmore ID [22857](#)), along with the medieval finds from MacEwans Castle (Canmore ID [39861](#)), while indicating occupation in those periods, may not necessarily date the primary construction or occupation of these structures (Marshall 1982;

Alcock & Alcock 1987; Brown & Cowie 1987). While it seems that the bulk of the dated sites were occupied or constructed prior to the 2nd century AD (and most probably some time before that date), the excavations at Barnluasgan and Balure add to this limited picture and possibly resolve some of these dating issues, providing a clearer understanding as to how small enclosed sites have developed within the area.

More locally relevant are the excavations that have been undertaken at Ardifuir, Druim an Duin, Dunadd and Loch Glashan. The first three were extensively excavated under the auspices of Christison and the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1904. As mentioned above, Ardifuir produced coarse handmade pottery from what was likely a globular pot and fragments of samian ware, both perhaps suggesting an Iron Age date. The presence of E ware, however, shows occupation into the historic period (Campbell 2007: 50, fig 36). The recovered diagnostic artefacts from Druim an Duin were even more limited, a steatite cup, (possibly suggesting an earlier medieval date) along with two rotary querns, the rest of the reported artefacts being utilised stones.

The various campaigns of excavations at Dunadd produced enough evidence to indicate an enclosure structure on the summit in the Iron Age and produced sherds of pottery with fabric similar to that recovered from Ardifuir (Fabric B2), along with sherds of vessels in coarser fabrics (Fabric B4), these indicative of an Iron Age date (Lane & Campbell 2000: 104–5). Some utilised stones and a yellow glass bead were more recently recovered from the dun site at Loch Glashan. In summary, it can be seen that there is a paucity of closely dated, securely stratified finds on Argyll duns.