

7. DISCUSSION OF THE TWO DUN SITES

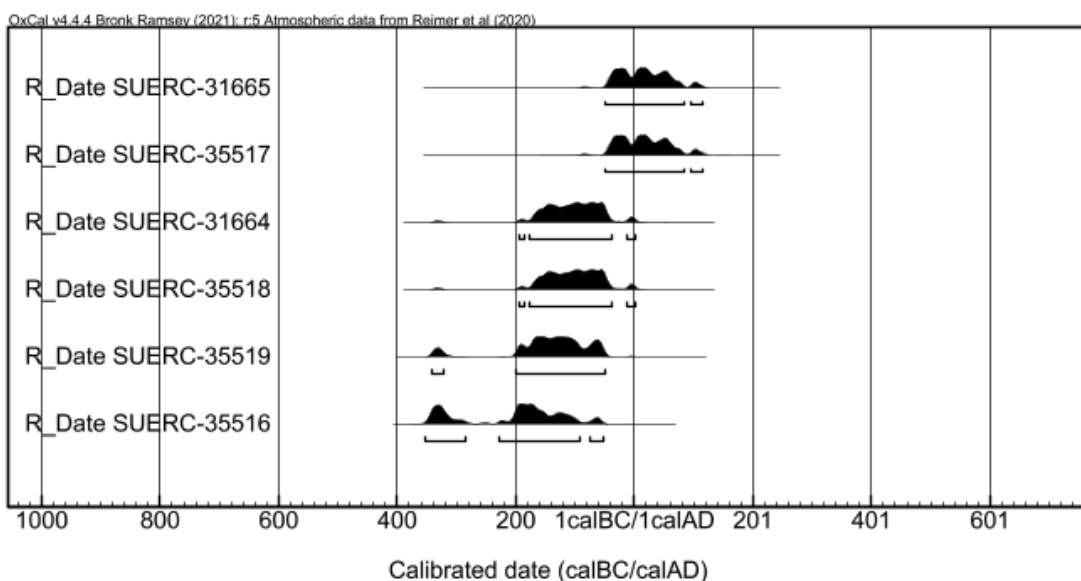
The six radiocarbon dates from the two sites are important in giving some independent chronology for this class of monument, supplementing the two previously dated sites at Kildalloig and Glashan (Illus 115). Three dates associated with the early dun phase at Barnluasgan indicate that the site was occupied some time between the later half of the 4th century BC and the middle of the 1st century BC, but probably in the later part of that range. These dates are similar to the Phase 1b date from Balure. The dates from the later enclosure at Barnluasgan and the secondary Enclosure 2 at Balure are also similar, dating these structures to the period of 1st centuries BC/AD. Thus both sites are firmly placed in the Middle Iron Age and were occupied and modified over a fairly constrained period, possibly a few centuries. There is no artefactual or other evidence that the sites were occupied in the early medieval period or later.

This similarity of dates between the two sites of course raises questions as to whether, given the relative proximity of the sites, the occupants of each site actually knew one another, or were indeed part of a wider kin grouping, questions we are unlikely ever to answer. However, the fact that these contemporary sites were of similar size, form and location does have implications as to the

status of the inhabitants, discussed further below in relation to the landscape context. The length of use of the site at Barnluasgan was also indicated by the relatively deep occupation deposits encountered along the eastern edge of the site, while at some point the original dun structure was remodelled to construct the more circular enclosure structure. At Balure deep accumulations of occupation deposits were absent within the excavated trenches, although some longevity of occupation is suggested by midden material lying below the wall of Enclosure 2. This perhaps suggests that the outer enclosures were added in an incremental fashion, although the relationship between Enclosures 3 and 4 in relation to Enclosures 1 and 2 is less clear.

While we have until now continued to describe the later structure at Barnluasgan as an ‘enclosure’, it seems reasonable now to question this classification. At present there is no need to consider the ‘enclosure’ as anything other than a modification of the original dun structure. The ‘enclosure’ and the earlier ‘dun’ both share the same vantage point, both are constructed with similar drystone walling and, while not contemporary, may have had the same function.

The site is probably more akin to the nearby site Dun a’ Chaisteil (Canmore ID [39054](#), RCAHMS 1988: No. 286), lying to the south-west near Castle Sween. This site displays a striking similarity in layout and a similar sequence of events is apparent



Illus 115 Plot of radiocarbon dates from Balure and Barnluasgan duns. (Image by Roddy Regan, © Kilmartin Museum)

although there it is argued the circular dun construction pre-dates the oval structure.

In terms of size, based on internal measurements almost half the listed dun sites in Lorn, Mid Argyll and Kintyre are smaller in size than the ‘enclosure’ at Barnluasgan including the nearby dun of Druim an Duin. However, the series of similarly classified monuments on the same north-east/south-west oriented ridge along the upper western slopes of Loch Coille Bharr and Loch Barnluasgan (Illus 3, Barnluasgan, Enclosures 1–6) highlights the problems with the earlier classification of site types. This grouping included the ‘enclosure’ at Barnluasgan; apart from Barnluasgan, none of these monuments have previously been examined by excavation, and beyond the suggestion that they were utilised as stock enclosures (Craw 1930: 144) little is known about their age or function. However, it is highly likely that these monuments represent more than one type of site and period. For example, the ‘enclosure’ at Kilmory Oib (Canmore ID [39170](#), RCAHMS 1988: No. 339) appears to be a mound surrounded by a semicircle of upright stones and could actually represent a burial monument. Three of the enclosures have internal diameters between 5 and 11m and would be described as hut-circles elsewhere (Canmore ID [39171](#), [39191](#) RCAHMS 1988: Nos. 331(1), 331(2b) and 331(3)). Another ‘enclosure’ appears to have massive walls and its form might be classified somewhere between a dun and a hut-circle (Canmore ID [39182](#), RCAHMS 1988: No. 331(2a)). Harder to classify, if that needs to be done at all, is an enclosure defined by upstanding stones with a diameter between 15 and 17m which could represent a roundhouse platform or even perhaps a burial monument (Canmore ID [39192](#), RCAHMS 1988: No. 331(4)). If we add to this another recently discovered circular ‘enclosure’ lying below the dun of Druim an Duin (which has no Canmore entry as yet), we have a complex group of geographically linked sites, all of which have the potential to give a more nuanced picture of structural developments in the later prehistoric period in this locale.

Apart from the overall form of dun enclosures, their most apparent feature is the remnants of their enclosing walls. The nature of the walls has been important in defining the dun category itself, and leads to discussion of the age and function of simple

through to complex types based on the presence or absence of intramural features such as guard cells, galleries and stairways.

In the late 19th century Thomas devised a classification scheme to differentiate the later prehistoric fortified sites as either a ‘dun’ or a ‘broch tower’ and sub-classed the ‘duns’ according to topographic location (Thomas 1890). Later additional definitions were used to categorise ‘dun’ sites that encompassed broch-style architectural features, with ‘duns’ containing intramural galleries, termed galleried duns, and structures with concentric walls with no evidence of an intramural stair or upper gallery, labelled as semi-brochs (Beveridge 1903; Young 1962; Feachem 1963). In the late 1960s, Maxwell (1969) devised a scheme to systematically differentiate ‘duns’ from ‘forts’. This scheme was incorporated by the RCAHMS and used during the archaeological surveys for the Inventory volumes on Argyll produced in the 1970s and 1980s (RCAHMS 1971, 1975, 1980, 1984, 1988) using the arbitrary division between sites capable of serving a ‘small community ... or only a single family’ (RCAHMS 1971: 16). Since then the basis of the categorisation of duns used by RCAHMS has been questioned and redefined. Harding refined the dun classification by separating sites that could potentially be roofed, termed a ‘dun house’ and up to 15m in internal diameter, from ones that were too large or irregularly shaped to be roofed (Harding 1984). Alcock & Alcock also highlighted the inconsistencies in the size classification between fort and duns. They demonstrated that 66% of known duns in Argyll fell within the criterion of ‘dun house’ and recognised a smaller-sized subset of sites that may have had a different function (Alcock & Alcock 1987). Armit later simplified the categorisation scheme for drystone structures (including duns, galleried duns, brochs and semi-brochs), devising the Atlantic roundhouse nomenclature, with its complex and simple types, later adapted and modified by Gilmour (Armit 1991, 1992, 2004; Gilmour 1994, 2000).

Around these structural parameters the debate flourished as to the chronological sequencing of duns in Argyll. Nieke postulated that forts in Argyll pre-date duns, based on the excavated examples of Balloch Hill (Canmore ID [38340](#)), Eilean an Duin (Canmore ID [22536](#)) and Duntroon (Canmore ID [39450](#)), which appear to belong to the 1st

millennium BC, and citing Dun Skeig (Canmore ID [38925](#)), where the dun overlies the fort, as part of this argument (Nieke 1990). As such Nieke, along with Alcock & Alcock, has argued that most duns in Argyll are later than the 1st millennium BC, while excavated examples appeared to be occupied in the 3rd quarter of the 1st millennium AD. This, however, has been disputed by Harding, who argued that circular roofable dun-houses were part of the Atlantic roundhouse tradition originating in the 1st millennium BC, with larger often non-round dun enclosures that contain buildings being later, possibly early medieval, in date (Harding 1997, 2004a). Henderson & Gilmour have more recently added to the debate, showing that the dun at Loch Glashan dates to the second half of the 1st millennium BC and belongs to the Atlantic roundhouse tradition along with other Argyll sites such as Rahoy, Dun Mor Vaul and Tirefour (Henderson & Gilmour 2011). They also argue that while other dun sites have produced artefacts of later date, they also had evidence of earlier but poorly dated occupation or constructional phases, for example at Druim an Duin and Ardifuir, and that few of the excavated sites have actually shown reliable 1st-millennium AD dates for their construction, as opposed to occupation.

Henderson & Gilmour have argued that the Atlantic roundhouse nomenclature, which does not rely on architectural details that are not often readily apparent on unexcavated dun sites, should be maintained to discuss field results within clearly understood parameters of the Atlantic roundhouse categories (Henderson & Gilmour 2011: 77).

Where then do Balure and Barnluasgan belong within the current typological framework? Balure might be considered a non-complex Atlantic roundhouse enclosed by outworks. At Barnluasgan both the early drystone enclosure or 'dun' and the later 'enclosure' might similarly be considered non-complex Atlantic roundhouses, although given its oval shape, the earlier dun is not strictly 'round'. So does that add anything to the discussion? Perhaps so, if, as has been shown, the later enclosure at Barnluasgan indicates a development from a more irregular oval shape to a regular circular one. Both sites were occupied from the latest part of the 1st millennium BC and probably continued to be occupied into the very early part of the 1st

millennium AD, which reinforces the argument that most dun structures probably date to the latter half of the 1st millennium BC, though many may have been occupied/reoccupied at later dates. However, the later phase of enclosure at Barnluasgan shows that circular stone-built roundhouses were still being constructed at the very end of the 1st millennium BC or early in the 1st millennium AD. This discussion around classification might be more useful if we had more excavated and dated examples of similar sites.

What does seem apparent is that the shape of many of these structures, including those at Balure and Barnluasgan, are primarily dictated by the underlying topography, although there may be a preference towards circularity if the selected location allows it. If considered as a defensive site then the steep escarpment to the west of the dun at Balure would have provided an adequate barrier, negating any need for walling on this side, as there was no evidence for the enclosure wall reaching the vertical edge of the escarpment at the west. Equally, when considered in a non-defensive light, the rock ridge at the west would have provided an adequate 'side' or natural wall to any potentially roofed structure. This arrangement can perhaps also be seen within other dun structures, such as Druim an Duin, for example. The published report on the excavation at Druim an Duin suggests that the escarpment would have provided an 'ample defence', although it goes on to argue that the western side of the dun at Druim an Duin was enclosed by a wall and this had subsequently fallen away (Christison et al 1905: 285–6). This assumption, however, can perhaps be questioned when examining the remains today. While the north wall of the dun structure does appear to continue to the vertical cliff face at the west, it remains questionable whether the wall on the southern side does the same on this side, and it seems more likely that, like Balure, the wall only abutted the steep sloping ridge.

The walls of the structures at both Balure and Barnluasgan were heavily denuded and provided no evidence of any intramural features, although their original presence cannot be discounted entirely. However, the relatively narrow nature of the surviving wall widths at Balure and Barnluasgan, in comparison to other sites where such features are

recorded, suggests these features were unlikely to have been present.

The wider wall footings on the eastern sides of both structures might suggest that the walls were originally battered on these sides, although again this can only be conjecture. Within the core of the wall foundations at Balure there could be discerned several ‘median’ faces, although these were not consistent enough to suggest the presence of earlier narrower walls. Often these were formed by short alignments of larger stones, sometimes forming ‘boxes’ retaining smaller stone packing and this appears to be part of the primary construction of the walls. Other Mid Argyll duns where ‘median faces’ have been noted are at Dun a’ Bhuilg (Canmore ID [39057](#)), Ballymeanoch (Canmore ID [39463](#)), Barr Iola (Canmore ID [39978](#)), Cnoc a’ Chaisteil (Canmore ID [22764](#)) and Loch Glashan. As discussed by Henderson & Gilmour, the many ‘median wall faces’ recorded within drystone enclosure sites in Argyll and elsewhere are probably primary structural features built to add stability to walls of the structures, as demonstrated by the excavation of such a feature at Kildonan (Fairhurst 1939: 193; Henderson & Gilmour 2011: 93–5). It is likely then that the ‘median’ faces at Balure had a similar function designed to counteract internal subsidence or slippage of wall material.

The presence of an external buttress on the eastern side of the enclosure wall at Barnluasgan suggests that subsidence was a real problem, one which may also have been encountered at nearby Druim an Duin, where a small rectangular buttress similar to the one at Barnluasgan is shown and described on its eastern down-slope side in the published excavation report (Christison et al 1905: 286–7, fig 13).

Only the basal courses survive at both sites, which makes it difficult to postulate the height of the original walls, or whether they may have provided support for a roof. Locally, however, the presence of scarcements built as part of the better preserved walls of the duns at Druim an Duin and Ardifuir suggest that these features may have supported a roof, as has been argued for a similar feature at the Black Spout, Perth and Kinross (Strachan 2013). At Druim an Duin and the Black Spout the stones of the wall at the scarcement level slope down slightly towards the internal core of the wall; at Druim an Duin this appears to be a deliberate construction

technique rather than slumping or subsidence, and was possibly designed to divert any roof run-off away from the internal wall face. It is possible that the lack of surviving height to the walls is not entirely due to later robbing, and that the upper parts of the walls were of turf, as in post-medieval Hebridean blackhouses. The use of turf for walling is increasingly being recognised in later prehistoric buildings (Romankiewicz 2019). Signs of collapsed turf were seen at Barnluasgan, though this could also have been derived from roofing material. However, both sites exhibited signs of later robbing, making it difficult to make any definitive statements as to the nature of the walling.

That some type of roof structure existed at both Barnluasgan and Balure is also suggested by the presence of post settings. The size and oval shape of the earlier structure at Barnluasgan may preclude that site from being wholly roofed, although the presence of post holes suggests that it was at least partially so. However, it is possible that building shapes were flexibly adapted to the topography and that irregular-shaped buildings could be roofed (Romankiewicz forthcoming). It is believed that the summit enclosure at Dunadd was roofed when it was adapted to a pear-shaped structure, though this was in the early medieval period (Lane & Campbell 2000: 94, ill. 3.7). The later enclosure at Barnluasgan (*c* 14m in diameter) could also have been fully roofed but this has to remain speculation. Similarly, the size of the upper enclosure at Balure (Enclosure 1, *c* 12m in diameter) suggests that this could have been roofed and here it is tempting to see the alignment of three post settings within the upper enclosure as remains of a central roof support, while a post pad and post hole in the outer enclosure might suggest the presence of other roofed structures.

Recent excavation work in Argyll has shown a long and widespread tradition of timber roundhouse building. Several Late Bronze Age examples of timber roundhouses have recently been excavated in Argyll, at Killinochonoch (Canmore ID [312124](#)), Glenshellach (Canmore ID [80610](#)), Dunstaffnage (Canmore ID [304920](#)) and Midross (Canmore ID [281534](#)) (Clare Ellis pers comm; Becket 2005). Other timber roundhouse structures dating to the Iron Age have also been excavated, such as the remains of two roundhouses excavated on Tìree in the early 20th century, at Croniag (Canmore

ID [21442](#)) and Balevullin (Canmore ID [21441](#)) (Beveridge 1903; Mann 1906; MacKie 1963). Other Iron Age roundhouses have been uncovered at Ardnadam (12–12.5m diam, Canmore ID [40746](#)), Bruach an Druimein (7.5–10m diam, Canmore ID [39451](#)), Midross (9m diam) and Glenshellach (Rennie 1984; Abernethy 2008; Clare Ellis pers comm). At Glenshellach the large Early Iron Age roundhouse structure had a diameter of 14m, a roof span that would have adequately covered the later enclosure at Barnluasgan and the upper enclosure at Balure.

None of these timber roundhouse sites had above-ground indications of their presence and it is unknown how many other timber Iron Age sites exist in Argyll. Whether or not future excavation reveals these to be relatively common structures across the region, we now have enough evidence to indicate a tradition of constructing large and possibly complex wooden structures in the Bronze Age and continuing into the Early Iron Age period. These timber-working skills, which could have been readily transferred to the construction of duns, are also apparent in crannog construction. It has been estimated that the majority of crannogs were probably constructed between the 9th century BC and the 3rd century AD (Crone 2012: 167, fig 6.2), while radiocarbon dates suggestive of Iron Age occupation or construction have been obtained from two crannog sites in Argyll: Loch Ederline (550–200 cal BC, Canmore ID [22775](#)) (Cavers & Henderson 2005) and Eilean Ban (400–60 cal BC, Canmore ID [22038](#)) (Holley 1994c).

Apart from the entrance to Enclosure 1 at Balure, the site had little evidence of substantial internal paving, apart from patches of gravel or small stones. At Barnluasgan the proximity of the bedrock to the surface of the internal area at the eastern side may have meant no surfacing was needed, although attempts had been made to level out more expansive gaps between the natural bedrock outcrops to the south, and there were remnants of stone slab paving running around the eastern wall of the enclosure, similar to the paving uncovered at Glashan (Henderson & Gilmour 2011: 83). This reflects evidence from other dun excavations in Argyll, where formal stone or slab paving is sparse or absent. Relatively well-preserved duns such as Druim an Duin and Ardifuir, although extensively excavated,

had no evidence of substantial internal paved or cobbled areas other than around the entranceways. On these sites it might be argued that any original flooring may not have survived later occupation disturbance and/or robbing, although in the absence of any such surfaces in both earlier and later periods, where not bedrock, any floors consisted of no more than beaten earth or areas of gravel/pebbles. We also have to consider the possibility of the use of wooden flooring. Many dun sites occupy steep rock ridges or knolls, those in North Knapdale mostly oriented south-west/north-east. The majority of excavated sites have shown that the walls of the duns enclose decidedly uneven ground, where some wooden flooring may have provided a more level internal surface, although any evidence of such flooring is unlikely to have survived. It might be argued that the function of the post placements against the upper enclosure at Balure supported such a floor, although this must remain speculation. At nearby Druim an Duin, however, there is a projecting lower scarcement or ledge running along the eastern wall circuit, and while this may be a later addition to the original structure it might also be substantive evidence for the presence of a suspended wooden floor, the under-floor area possibly used for storage.

There is arguably evidence for a raised wooden floor at the vitrified dun at Rahoy in Morvern. The published excavation report describes a ‘raised hearth’ around which lay uneven ground ‘partly filled with large irregular blocks set flat face upwards’ supporting burnt posts that ‘would serve admirably as supports for beams’ (Childe & Thorneycroft 1938: 32), although any such interpretative extrapolation from the published excavation report is not particularly easy and has to be treated with caution.

The outlying square ‘cairn’ structure at Barnluasgan still defies interpretation, although it can perhaps be discarded as an outwork of the dun. Several possibilities suggest themselves, including that it could be the remains of a demolished shepherd’s bothy. In favour of this interpretation are its rectangular shape and the loose nature of much of the overlying stones with little soil matrix, presenting the excavator with a relatively recent appearance/feel. However, the lack of any obvious internal wall face or post-medieval finds may argue against this interpretation, while the loose material might be

explained by previous antiquarian investigation or, more likely, disturbance by previous forestry. As to what else this structure might represent, that is still open to question and to resolve it would require more extensive archaeological work than was afforded during this work.

Hearths were uncovered in both the earlier and later structures at Barnluasgan, associated with deposits that contained quantities of burnt cereal grain, suggestive of cooking areas or perhaps corn drying. Several areas of burning were identified within the upper enclosure at Balure, including a series of superimposed stone hearths, and again charred cereals were recovered from associated deposits around this area, suggesting food preparation or cereal processing.

In relative terms, occupation deposits at Barnluasgan produced a larger quantity of carbonised plant material, while similar evidence from Balure was more limited. The profile of the cultivated crops at Barnluasgan reflects the pattern of crop processing seen across Scotland in the Iron Age, with the predominance of hulled six-row barley (*Hordeum vulgare* var *vulgare*). Secondary crops of oats (*Avena* spp), naked barley (*Hordeum vulgare* var *nudum*) and emmer wheat (*Triticum dicoccum/spelta*) appear to have been grown in small amounts to supplement the main barley crop or for specific purposes. The presence of possible bread/club wheat may hint at certain food produce being brought to the site from further afield. The general absence of chaff and other crop-processing waste from the site suggests that processing took place off-site, the cleaned crop being brought onto site to be dried, stored and ground. Weed species are sparse within the collected samples, with only slightly elevated numbers of weed seeds in samples containing larger numbers of grain. This could suggest that wild taxa, principally a segetal/ruderal element, were either growing around occupation areas or accidentally brought to site with harvested crops. A similar range of cereals was recovered from occupation deposits of the Iron Age enclosure at Dunadd, with Phase 1A occupation (410 cal BC–200 cal BC) producing small quantities of barley, while Phase 1B (120 cal BC–130 cal AD) produced barley with some oats along with emmer/spelt.

At Barnluasgan occasional fragments of hazelnut shell were present across the site and may have been

deliberately collected as food or animal fodder or brought on to the site with firewood. Woodland plant species were also exploited, including hazel, birch and oak. This reflects the emerging environmental picture for Argyll in this period, which suggests increased exploitation of woodland (Rymer 1974; Andrews et al 1987). At Rahoy among the mass of burnt material identified, oak was predominant, while hazel, willow or poplar, birch and elm were also present (Childe & Thorneycroft 1938: 41).

At Balure smaller quantities of barley were present within the collected samples, which also produced evidence of the exploitation of local woodland species similar to that at Barnluasgan. Interestingly, the samples most abundant in carbonised barley seeds were from two dumps of material in Enclosure 2 and not directly associated with a hearth or area of burning. Faunal remains at both sites were limited to small fragments of burnt bone, none of which were identifiable to species.

The range and quantity of artefacts from Balure and Barnluasgan, as with other Argyll sites of the period, is limited, although both sites had a similar range of artefact types. It is difficult to compare the sites to others in Argyll as there have been few modern excavations (those mostly small-scale), and many sites have later reoccupation, but a tabulation of the relative quantity of finds from duns, forts and crannogs in the area which had 1st-millennium AD occupation (Crone & Campbell 2005: 120–1, table 4) shows that the Balure assemblage is comparable to other dun sites such as Kildonan, Ugadale and Eilean Rìgh. If one excludes the occasional imported Roman artefacts, there is little to differentiate the artefactual assemblage of forts, duns and crannogs at this time, apart from the survival of organic material on crannogs. It may be that status was exhibited more in the structures themselves than in the material culture.

Apart from stone artefacts, which had a similar range of types on both sites, Balure had significantly greater range of material, with three glass beads, a possible iron sickle, and a variety of metalworking debris, while Barnluasgan had only one, unidentified, iron object. Most of the finds from Balure, including the unusual ones, came from the uppermost occupation deposits, perhaps indicating a general increase in wealth in the early 1st millennium AD. It may also be that the inhabitants of Balure were

of higher status, or were wealthier, than those at Barnluasgan; they certainly seemed to have access to a wider trade network as indicated by the beads.

Looking in more detail at the artefacts, utilised stones are common on excavated dun sites, with locally collected pebbles used as rubbing stones, whetstones and slickstones, and both sites produced a similar range of these types. Similarly, another ubiquitous activity is the working of slate or schist, to produce discs most likely used as whorls or game counters. However, unlike Barnluasgan, Balure produced a significant quantity of struck lithics (flint and quartz). While in the past this type of material has been dismissed as residual early prehistoric material, there has been increasing acceptance of the possibility small-scale flint working at later periods (Young & Humphrey 1999; Healey in Lane & Campbell, 2000: 200). As most of the Balure material was found in the artefact-rich upper occupation deposits, and as this included raw material, debitage and tools, it seems likely that this represents in situ manufacture in the Iron Age. A single upper stone of a rotary quern was recovered from both sites, the one at Barnluasgan unusual in being decorated with raised banding. The presence of the querns indicated that grain processing took place on site. Both querns appear to have been deliberately broken, and both possibly deposited as part of closure activities at the end of the life of the sites, as they were found in the latest deposits.

At Balure on-site metalworking was indicated by the presence of furnace lining, slag, hammerscale, crucible fragments and a possible mould fragment. Barnluasgan had less evidence, with small fragments of fuel ash slag recovered from the site, although these could have been the result of any process that involved a relatively high heat. There is evidence of metalworking from other excavated dun sites in Argyll, such as the fragment of iron slag from Dunan Breac, although this, as with other evidence of ironworking from dun sites, is not securely dated (Graham 1915).

More unusual was the recovery of three glass beads from Balure, two of which are toggle beads. Research by Martina Bertini and Clare Ellis on the toggle beads from Scotland, the Isle of Man and Ireland has shown the glass toggle beads from Balure are probably of localised manufacture reusing imported Roman glass (Bertini & Ellis 2015; Bertini

& Ellis forthcoming). In Argyll glass toggle beads have also been found on other sites, at Dun Fhinn, Ronachan Bay and the fort at Dunagoil. Jordan argues that given the relative rarity of toggle beads in Ireland they may have been considered prestige items (Jordan 2010: 28). If this is the case, their recovery may cast some light on where they have been found. Apart from the Kilninian example, all are fort or dun sites, which indicates these are places where, given the current evidence, prestige items are predominately consumed. The bead recovered from Kilninian on Mull was very likely lost or discarded during the manufacturing process, possibly by an itinerant craftsman who would have supplied the local demand. The Scottish distribution of glass toggle beads, along with those of the Isle of Man and Ireland, suggests a distinct Atlantic bias and indicates functioning trade connections during this period. The use of Roman glass to produce these beads in the pre-Roman Iron Age suggests contacts with areas further south at a time when very few Roman artefacts were reaching Scotland (Hunter 2007: 22).

Pottery was absent from Barnluasgan but a small assemblage of pottery was recovered from Balure, representing the remains of least two vessels. The limited size of the assemblage and vessel types can be seen as a reflection of wider ceramic traditions that developed across mainland and southern Argyll in this period. Undecorated pottery has been recovered from a number of dun sites in Argyll, including Dunan nan Nighean (Piggott 1951), Ardifuir (Christison et al 1905), Leccamore South (MacNaughton 1891, 1893), Kildalloig (Bigwood 1964), Kildonan (Fairhurst 1939), Dun Aorain (RCAHMS 1970), Dun Cul Bhuirg (Ritchie & Lane 1980), An Caisteal (Fairhurst 1962), Dun Mhic Choigil (Hedges & Hedges 1977) and Dunadd (Lane & Campbell 2000). The majority of these vessels have coarse fabrics and are often crude in form. Compared to these coarse forms, the fabric of the Balure vessels is relatively fine and very similar to the fabric of pottery sherds recovered from Ardifuir and Dunadd (Christison et al 1905: 269, NMS Nos. GR 25 and GR 27; Lane & Campbell 2000: 104, illus 4.5, NMS No. GP 247). While none of these sherds are from directly dated Iron Age deposits, Campbell & Lane suggest these may be part of a Middle Iron Age tradition found in mainland Argyll.

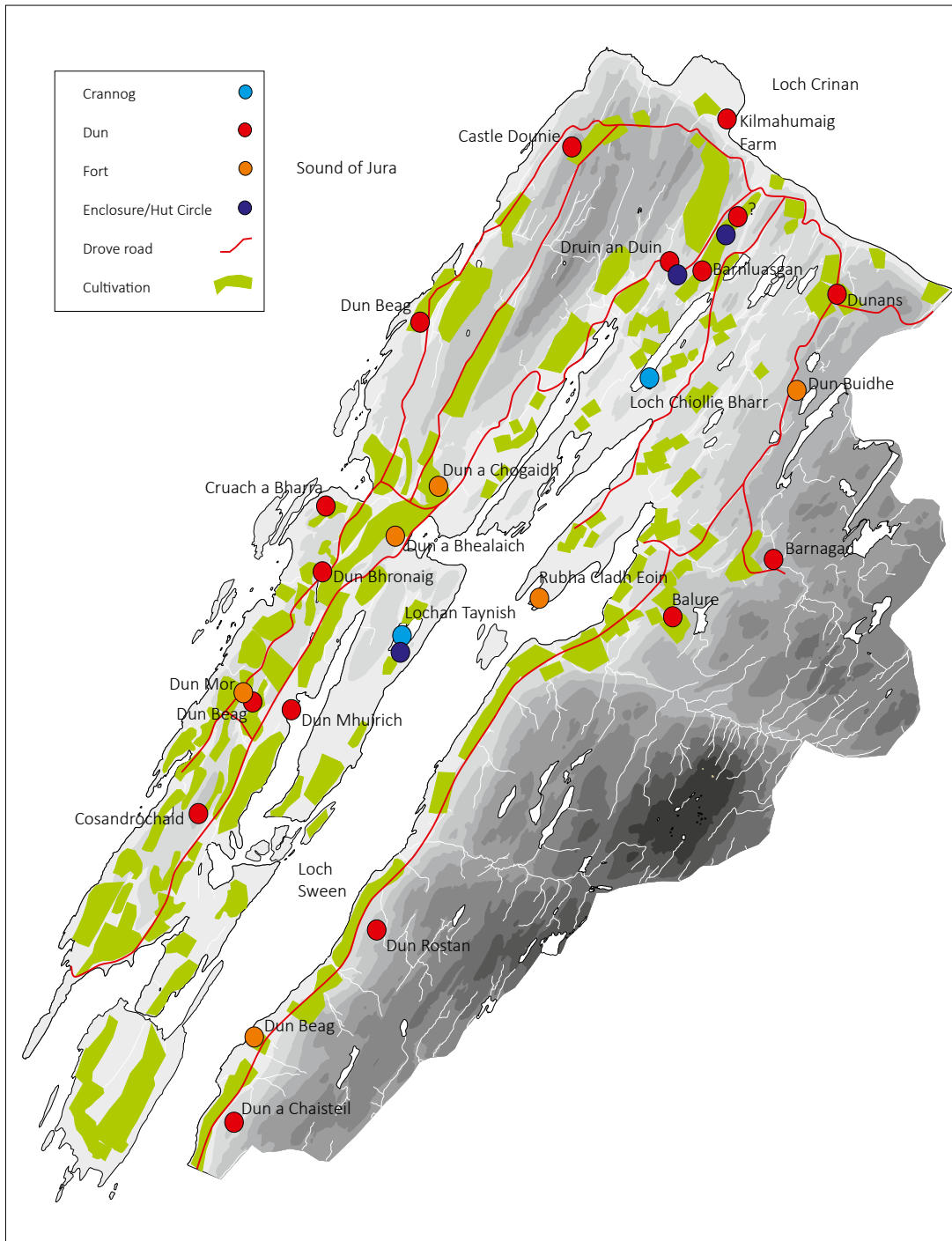
If so, the pottery from Balure might indicate that this undecorated pottery tradition belongs to the late 1st millennium BC, perhaps underlined by pottery of similar type recovered from a possible roundhouse platform at Carnassarie, which produced a date of 380–190 cal BC (SUERC-31666) (Ellis 2008). The relatively small quantity of sherds recovered, along with limited form types, perhaps suggests a restricted function or use of pottery in this period, with most vessels perhaps being made of wood or other organic materials. This is in contrast to relatively abundant production of decorated Hebridean wares that develops further north and west in the same period and suggests a zonal differentiation across Argyll in terms of ceramic traditions. If the presence of toggle beads throughout the same Atlantic zone in this period can be used to demonstrate active cultural and trading networks across this region, then other reasons perhaps need to be sought for the general presence/absence of decorated Hebridean pottery from other areas in Argyll, beyond the scope of this paper.

Previous palaeoenvironmental research indicates climatic change across Argyll in the Iron Age. From the early 1st millennium BC woodland clearance has been identified, at Aros Moss, Kintyre (Nichols 1967) and later, probably after 300 BC, at Loch Shiel, Ardnamurchan (Tipping 1994). It is argued that both of these pieces of evidence of woodland loss represent clearance for agriculture during this period. By the mid-1st millennium BC, however, there is also evidence from Oronsay and Colonsay of woodland regeneration on previously cultivated land, with woodland regeneration also evidenced in pollen data from Gallanach Beg, Oban (Rhodes et al 1992) and Aros Moss in the second half of the 1st millennium BC. This probably reflects deterioration in climate over this period, becoming increasingly wetter and cooler, but despite this the pollen record shows continuity of crop growing there up till at least the early medieval period (Tipping & Verrill 2011: 167). Estimating population in this period, even if we assumed that the majority of dun structures were contemporary, probably defies realistic estimates given our current knowledge. However, assuming a generally stable population, loss of land to climate deterioration would have led to increased competition for land. This pressure on land tenure may have manifested in violence, leading

to a movement away from less easily defensible sites to ones that offered more protection, with perhaps a move away from primarily wooden structures to ones substantially constructed in drystone and built on ground where access could be more readily controlled. Without knowing a fuller picture of how and where the majority of the Iron Age population lived in Argyll it is difficult to make assumptions about who built the dun structures, their social standing within that society or how any dun structure may have reflected it.

Some insights as to their status and possible function might be gleaned by looking at where these structures were built. A study of the distribution and location of dun sites in Argyll shows that the majority of sites are located between sea-level and 120m OD and occupy similar topographic locations, generally on gently sloping ground at southern, south-western and western facing hills (Werner 2007). The distribution of dun and fort sites in North Knapdale (Illus 116) reflects that seen elsewhere in Argyll, where they are generally on elevated ground below the 150m contour, predominantly overlooking and having relatively easy access to the sea. The proximity to and perhaps the control of local resources, whether marine resources, animal pasture or arable land, was undoubtedly a prime consideration in the selection of a suitable site to construct a dun structure.

Today many of the dun sites in North Knapdale and elsewhere in Argyll are not always close to the readily identifiable areas of potential cultivable land or areas of pasture (particularly where commercial forestry plantation now encroaches). Identifying Iron Age land-use patterns surrounding any specific dun site is problematic, given that the available agricultural land in Argyll, as elsewhere in the Highlands, was limited, with any potentially exploitable land utilised by successive generations of farmers. More detailed land-use survey and excavation might identify relict land-use patterns, but this work remains a task for future study. At present the best indications we have for potentially exploitable land is the extent of land cultivated during the population peak of the early 19th century. While this might give an upper limit of arable exploitation, it is more difficult to gain a picture of potential pastoral use. Using historic maps and aerial photographs, a plot of relict agriculture



Illus 116 Dun, fort, enclosure and crannog distribution with areas of later cultivation in North Knapdale. (Image by Roddy Regan, © Kilmartin Museum)

patterns can be produced for North Knapdale and while not definitive, gives some idea of potentially exploitable land.

This late land-use pattern shows a strong correlation of dun sites and potential cultivable

land which perhaps one would expect, if duns, as we tend to assume, were built by those controlling the immediate landscape (Illus 116). There also appears to be a correlation between duns and the older established tracks or drove routes through the

area, although whether both functioned at the same time would be hard to prove.

The plot of duns and forts in North Knapdale also suggest there are ‘landscape gaps’ where one might ‘expect’ the presence of a dun structure, given the proximity of cultivated or previously cultivated ground. Survey work in the area has ‘plugged’ several of these gaps, identifying dun structures at Balure itself and at Laganruere/Barnagad (Canmore ID [290104](#), Regan 2006) and confirming what are probably enclosure structures at Dunans (Canmore ID [39611](#)) and Dun Buidhe (Canmore ID [39411](#), Regan 2005). Despite this, there remain areas such as the Taynish peninsula and Danna where no dun or fort structures have as yet been recorded. Taynish does have a potential crannog (Canmore ID [39085](#)) and the name of Dun Taynish at the north end of the peninsula hints that a site may still await discovery. The confirmation of what appears to be a large roundhouse near Locahan Taynish, along with the ‘enclosures’ at Barnluasgan for example, although as yet undated, suggests other types of structure need to be considered when compiling a picture of the Iron Age landscape (ScARF 2017). The dates from Balure and Barnluasgan suggest that many of these sites would have been occupied at the same time, even if they have different morphologies. Whether or not these sites represent the homesteads of single

extended families, the close spacing suggests a fairly flat hierarchical structure. However, the investment of resources in building these duns, and the access to traded goods, suggest the inhabitants were above the subsistence level. There may well have been less substantial structures (for example of turf and wattle) for a lower stratum of society, but these structures would be very difficult to identify. The recent excavations of an unenclosed site at Kilninian, Mull may be an example of such a type of structure, and has a radiocarbon date similar to the duns discussed here (Bertini & Ellis 2015).

The work at both Balure and Barnluasgan has firmly placed the construction and occupation of these dun sites in the late 1st millennium BC, continuing into the early centuries AD, and adds to a growing body of evidence that indicates this period might represent a florescence of dun building and occupation. This present work adds to our picture of the Iron Age in Argyll but much still remains to be understood in terms of chronology and function of these structures. Duns, however, are only one structural element in a wider Iron Age landscape about which we still know little and we need to understand more about these and what is happening around and between them before we can more fully address any questions of the place of duns in their contemporary landscape.