

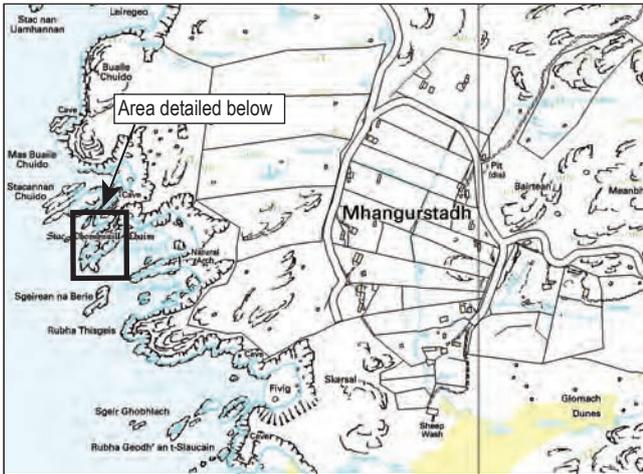
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## PART II: THE SURVEYS

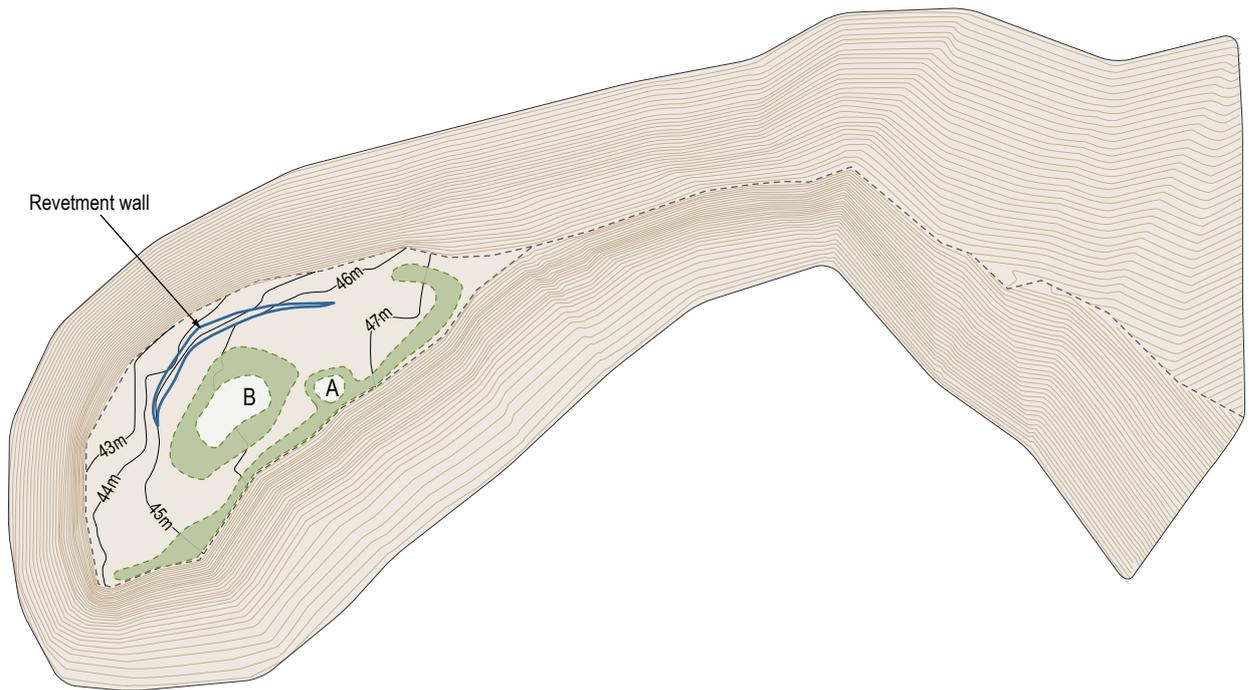
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The results of the field surveys are presented clockwise from the south-west (*illus 1*). All place

name spellings are in Gaelic as produced by the Ordnance Survey in the current map edition.



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KEY	
-----	Cliff edge
—	Archaeological structure
●	Archaeological structure, heavily overgrown



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## 6 STAC DOMHNUILL CHAIM

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### 6.1 Physical description and location

Stac Domhnuill Chaim is situated in common grazing land, *c* 1km WNW from the village of Mangersta, in the parish of Uig (NGR: NB 0022 3152; NMRS no. NB03SW1; SAM 5327). Oral tradition suggests that it was once a hideout and fortress. It is a very dramatically shaped stack, nearly 50m high, but only *c* 20m in diameter on top, and is joined to the mainland via a 60m-long knife-edge or spine of rock (*illus 2*). The coastline comprises high, incised cliffs of Lewisian gneiss (Burgess & Church 1997, 69) for many kilometres either side of the site, broken by Mangersta Beach 1km to the south and by Camus Uig 6km to the north.

### 6.2 Erosion

According to the Coastal Erosion Assessment, Lewis this area of coast is ‘actively and rapidly eroding’ (Burgess & Church 1997, 67). This is clear when visiting the site. Local people confirmed that Stac Domhnuill Chaim was disappearing at a dramatic rate, particularly along the spinal ridge and the vertical cliffs at each end, where it seemed that the most active erosion was occurring. Access was made considerably more difficult and dangerous than it had been a mere ten years ago.

The archaeology is also threatened by erosion. Around the southern edge of Structure B, the main structure (*illus 2* and below), occupation deposits were exposed in two erosion scars. The building was being undermined by erosion and was open to the full force of prevailing Atlantic conditions. The eastern, landward edge of the stack was also being progressively undercut, eroding a perimeter wall, and directly threatening Structures A and B. Further extensive erosion scars were discovered on the western side of the plateau when revisited in 2006 (see below). However, traces of steps and a pathway could still be made out climbing the landward side of the stack, implying that the overall shape had not changed dramatically since it was last occupied, traditionally in the sixteenth century (MacDonald 1967).

### 6.3 Access

Access to the stack was probably the most difficult of all attempted. A vertical cliff of *c* 20m was the first obstacle, leading to a thin spine covered in loose,

fallen blocks. The spine dropped and then rose to the foot of the stack proper over a distance of *c* 60m. Finally, a 30m vertical ascent led to the summit (*illus 3*).

Two stakes were used to anchor a set of static ropes for the initial descent. Two rock bolts anchored further static ropes along the length of the spine. These ropes were used as protection to traverse the spine, with rock anchors fixed every 5m. It was necessary to knock off substantial amounts of loose stone blocks during the initial traverse. The final ascent was made using climbing techniques, with a combination of temporary rock anchors, pitons and rock bolts providing protection. One stake was fixed on the summit, which was positioned as far from the visible archaeology as possible. This stake and two rock bolts had to be left in the stack to provide protection for egress.

### 6.4 Previous work

Stac Domhnuill Chaim was amongst the coastal fortifications described by F W L Thomas in 1890. At that time it was widely known as the refuge of Domhnall Cam MacAulaidh (Donald of the Squint), a 16th-century Uig hero and outlaw. Thomas described the site:

It is about 100 feet high, and on the top is not more than about 20 yards in length. A deep ravine cuts it off from the shore, which, however, remains connected with a rocky isthmus. The rock is otherwise surrounded by the sea, and is quite inaccessible, except on the land side, where a narrow path leads up the steep brae. A wall, from 4–5 feet thick, defends it on the land side, in which, at the south end, there is a gap or gateway, 2 feet wide. The gate would be extremely dangerous to force, as the cliff is close in front of it. There are the ruins of a cottage, 18½ by 10 feet interiorly, and the walls 4½ feet thick, on the *terre pleine* of the rock, as also a sheep-pen attached to the wall. (F W L Thomas 1890, 395)

A plan of the site is produced in the same article, which was presumably drawn by Rev. MacPhail in the 1860s, as much of the information on the archaeology of these sites was gathered by MacPhail for Thomas (Robson 2004). The original pencil drawing of this plan is held by the National Monuments Record, Edinburgh (Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Collection, DC25533, p 20).

*Illus 2 (opposite) Location map and topographic survey of Stac Domhnuill Chaim*



*Illus 3 Stac Domhnuill Chaim, looking south*

On the first edition of the Ordnance Survey map of the area, surveyed in 1852–3, the stack is shown with a clear access path along the spine joining the site to the mainland. It is given two alternative names, Stac Domhnuill Chaim and Stac na Beirgh (*sic*).

By 1969, when the site was visited by the Ordnance Survey once again, it was recorded as inaccessible due to cliff falls. However, the site continued to be visited by local people (without ropes) until the late 1980s or early 1990s, since which time most have perceived it as too dangerous (Jed Yates, Mangersta, pers comm).

A more recent sketch plan of features on the top of the stack was made by a visiting archaeologist in 1992 (E T Jones, now held in Western Isles SMR).

### 6.5 The survey

The archaeology on the summit was well described by Thomas (above), and little change was seen when visited by STAC. There were two buildings on the summit of the stack, Structures A and B. They were partly enclosed by a perimeter wall (Structure C), which also formed a small, enclosed courtyard at the

north end of the site. A possible path led to the lower reaches of the stack on the west side, running from the courtyard, and parallel to Structure B (illus 4).

#### *Structure A*

Structure A was a small, *c* 2m internal diameter, circular turf and stone building adjoining the perimeter wall (Structure C) on the north-eastern edge of the stack. It had no apparent entrance, although a small break was shown in the middle of the west wall by MacPhail (Thomas 1890).

#### *Structure B*

Structure B was the remains of a sub-rectangular building, of stone and turf, 2 × 6m internally, *c* 5 × 10m externally. There was no visible entrance, although one was shown to the south of the east wall by MacPhail (Thomas 1890). It occupied the centre of the stack, and was separated from Structure A by a narrow gap, which was likely to have been a wider passage in the past, before the walls of both structures slumped and broadened. The walls survived to a height of between 0.5m and 1m.

Two base sherds of undecorated pottery were discovered outside the western end of the structure



*Illus 4 Stac Domhnuill Chaim from the north, showing structures on top of the stack*

eroding from one of two open erosion scars. They are considered to be later prehistoric or medieval in date (see [Appendix 3](#)).

#### *Structure C*

Structure C was the perimeter wall. It was constructed of stone and turf, and extended from the northern end of the stack, down the eastern side, to its southern end. At this end the wall became harder to define, but it possibly enclosed two terraces, which occupied the southern end of the stack. Beyond and enclosing these lower terraces, a line of stones may have represented another wall.

A revetment wall, which may have been contemporary with the perimeter wall, appeared to support Structure B around the western edge of the stack. This formed part of a possible path which could be traced to the north-west corner of the site, leading to a small, enclosed area formed by the perimeter wall and the natural rock outcrops at the north end of the site.

#### *Western eroding scar*

A visit in 2006 led to the discovery of a new eroding scar on the western edge of the stack, 5–10m west

from, and 2–3m down slope, of the structures. It measured *c* 4m long by 1.5m high, and had two main deposits, one sealing the other. A pit containing a charcoal-rich soily fill was noticed cut into the lower deposit. The pit was V-shaped in profile, *c* 0.3m deep and the same in diameter. Some 0.5m to the right and 0.2–0.3m lower down from this pit a large body sherd of decorated pottery was discovered, which has since been assigned to the early prehistoric, possibly Neolithic period by Trevor Cowie at the National Museum of Scotland ([illus 5](#)).

#### *6.6 Discussion*

The first edition of the Ordnance Survey map for the district gave two alternative names for this site, Stac Domhnuill Chaim and Stac na Beirghe (*sic*). The latter name may be earlier than the former, as Gaelic *beirgh* derives from either the Old Norse *berg* meaning ‘rock outcrop’ which has been borrowed into Gaelic as *beirgh* ‘coastal promontory (usually with narrow neck or isthmus)’ ([Cox 2006](#), 12), or the Old Norse *borg*, or fort. The name element *beirgh* is frequently associated with coastal archaeological



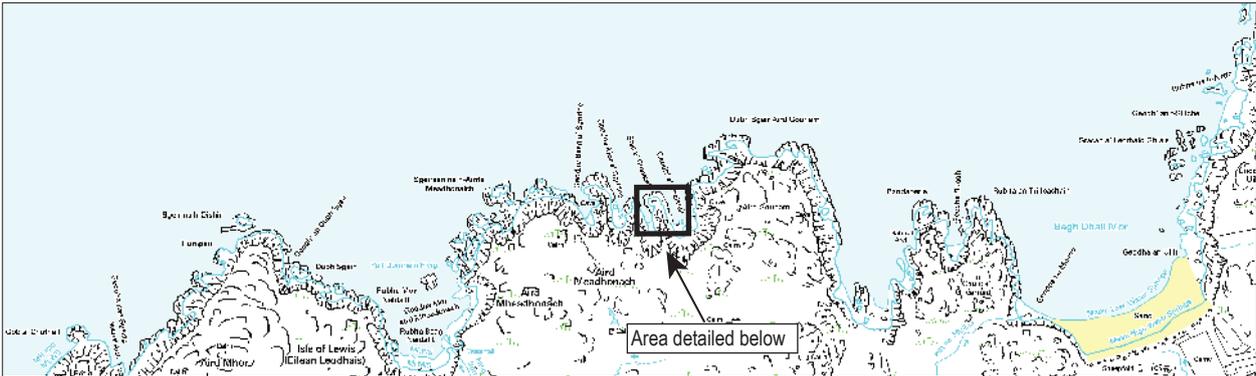
*Illus 5 Neolithic pottery from Stac Domhnuill Chaim*

sites. The nomenclature may therefore suggest the possibility of an earlier occupation of the site prior to its use by the eponymous hero. This possibility seems to have been confirmed by the discovery of prehistoric pottery on the site, which parallels finds from Eilean nan Luchruban (see [Section 11](#) below) and Dunasbroc ([Section 9](#) below).

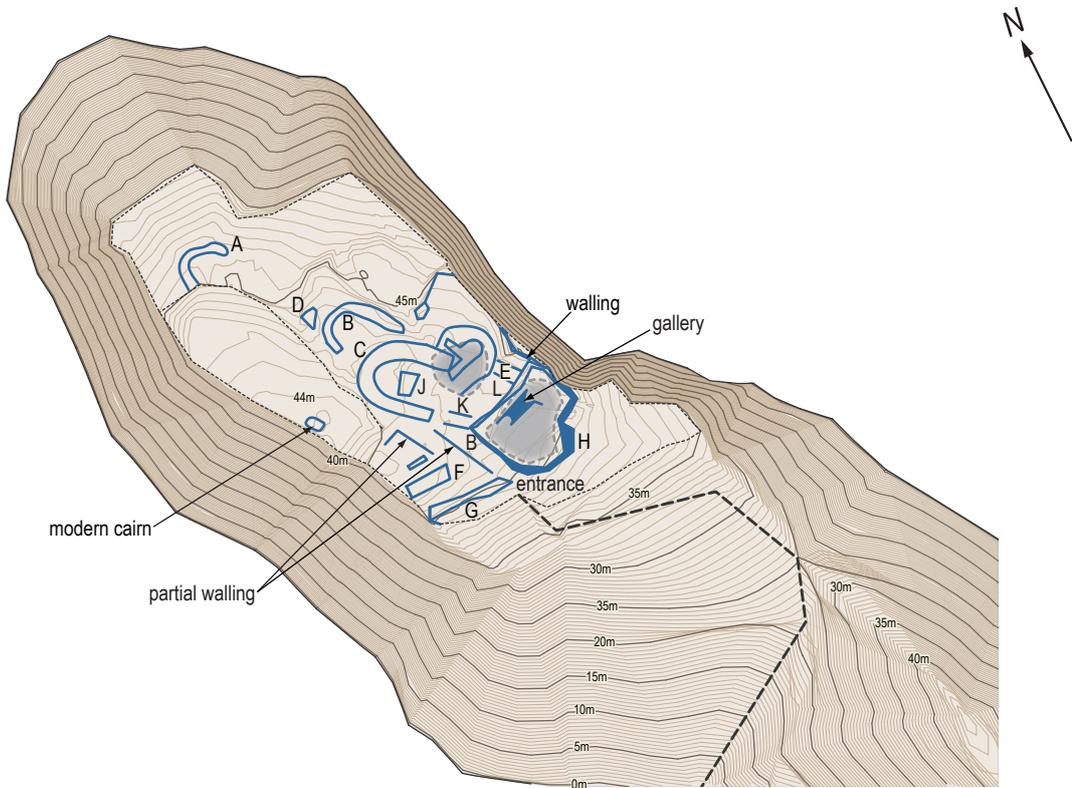
There was severe and rapid current erosion of both the archaeology and the access route, making future investigation more difficult and dangerous each year.

#### *6.7 Potential for future work*

Depending on winter storm conditions, it is possible that the next two decades may see the total destruction of this site. Some time before that it will become effectively inaccessible. It would therefore seem sensible that this site be subject to evaluation or small-scale excavation as a matter of some urgency.



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KEY	
-----	Cliff edge
—	Archaeological structure
---	Access route
●	Tumbled masonry



Illus 6 Location map of Stac a' Chaisteal and topographic survey