
7 STAC A' CHAISTEAL

7.1 Physical description and location

Stac a' Chaisteal (NMRS no. NB24NW 5) is located at NGR: NB 2024 4540, almost exactly halfway between the glens of Garenin and Dalmore in the parish of Uig, in the common grazing lands, *c* 4km from the nearest road end (illus 6). It is a pinnacle shaped stack, over 50m high, and joined to the adjacent cliffs by a thin, 35m long spine of rock (illus 7).

This site can be compared to Stac Domhnuill Chaim in relation to the modern settlement pattern. They both lie on the edge of the township's lands, away from the central focus of settlement, visually and geologically. Both stacks display the collapsed remnants of narrow promontories adjacent to high cliffs. A large natural amphitheatre is formed by the presence of more elevated promontories on the eastern and western sides of Stac a' Chaisteal, with the stack lying in the centre.

The cliffs surrounding the stack comprise basement Lewisian gneiss overlain by glacial till (Burgess & Church 1997, 207). The bottom two thirds of the stack have rock shelves and sparse areas of vegetation covered in boulders which have

fallen from above. The top third comprises a rock slab or ramp which represents an entire bedding plane of Lewisian gneiss, as the strata along this length of coast lean out from the vertical, creating an acute angle to the sea. The seaward side of the stack forms a near-vertical cliff with a jagged cross-section through all the geological strata, punctuated by eroding ledges and grassy terraces. The east and west sides of the stack are also vertical.

7.2 Erosion

This area of coastline is actively eroding. There are obvious signs of rock falls and large block slippage of the bedrock, as well as erosion of the topsoil at cliff edges. The incised coastline gives rise to many promontories and stacks, and was specifically highlighted in the CEAL project as requiring regular monitoring (Burgess & Church 1997, 204).

Erosion of the stack itself is of particular concern. At the time of the survey archaeological structures were noted to be collapsing down the landward-facing cliff-edge. Evidence for the speed of this erosion was described by Mr D R MacLeod of Gearrannan, who used to climb the stack in his youth. Mr MacLeod informed us that about 35 years ago it was still possible to pass along the ridge connecting the stack to the land, which is now a treacherously loose knife-edge of rock. The Ordnance Survey team of 1969 presumably also managed to access the stack at that time, given the detail of their description (see below).

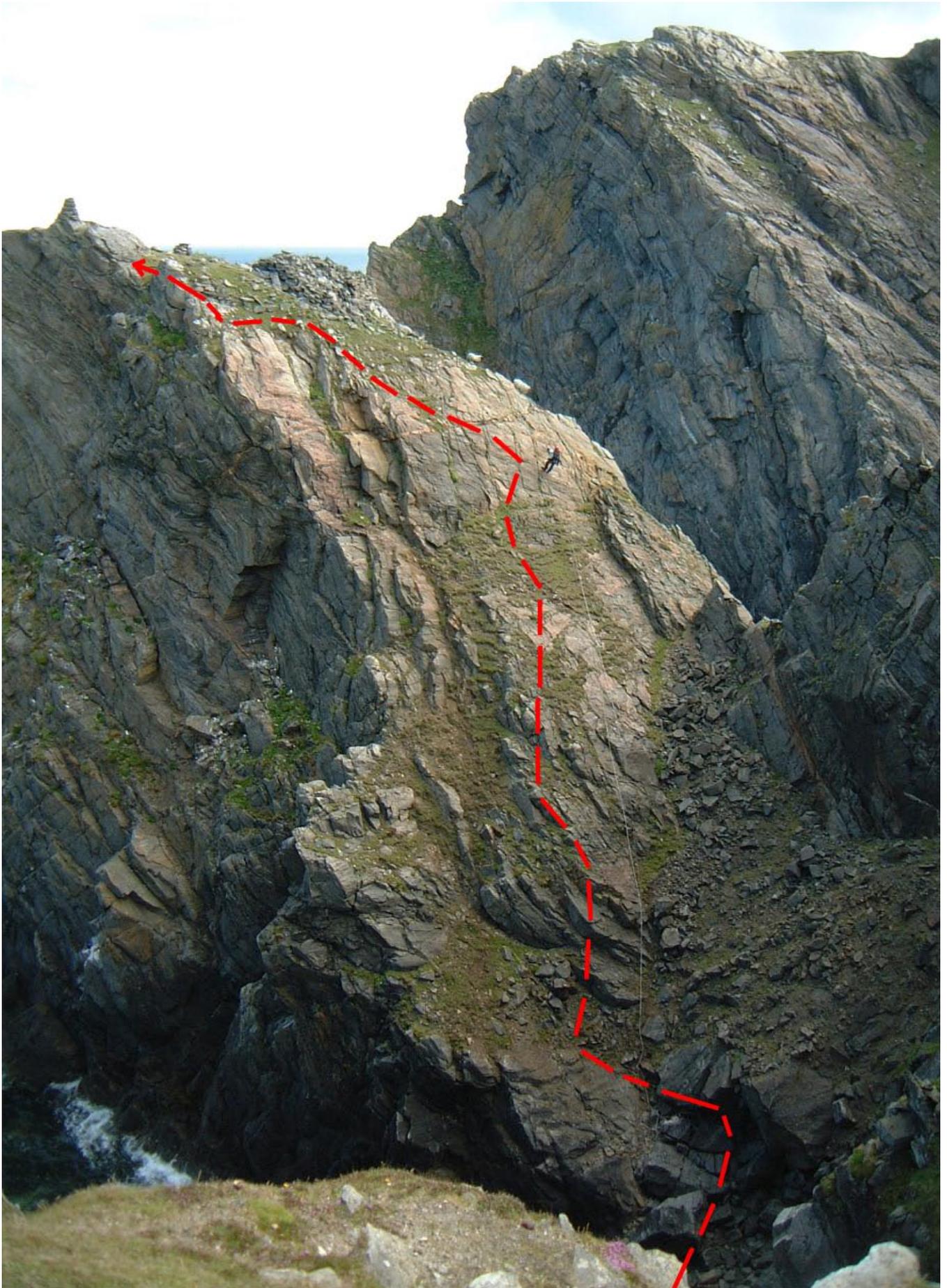
7.3 Access

Access to Stac a' Chaisteal was difficult and time-consuming, given its distance from the road and its physical shape. All equipment had to be carried over moorland to the site, which involved a walk of 45 minutes. A safe route had then to be found onto the stack: the spine was too dangerous and unstable to traverse, and there was the danger of loose and eroding rock falling onto the foreshore.

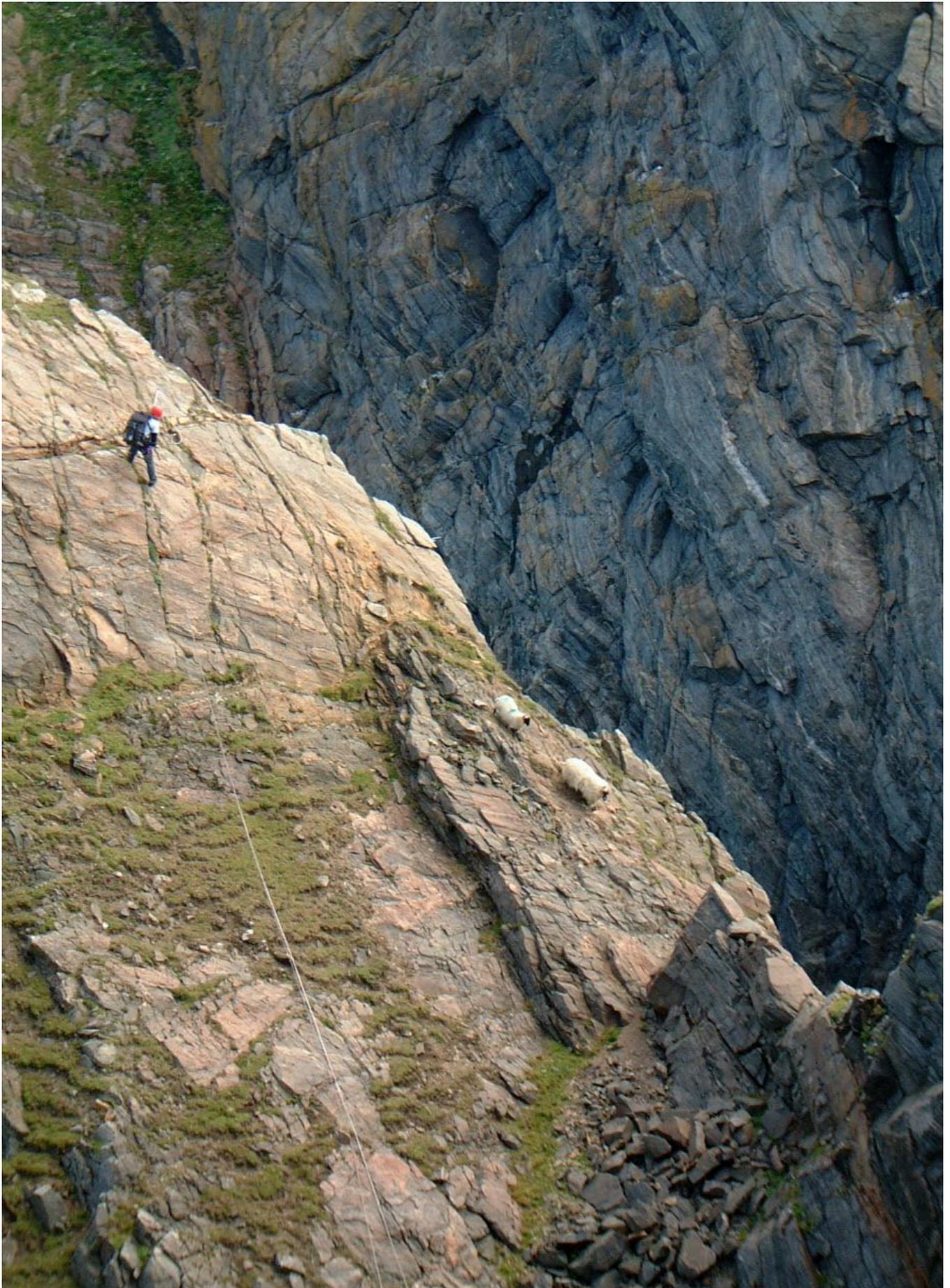
The access route was therefore chosen to avoid these loose areas as far as possible. It commenced with a 30m abseil down a steep grassy ramp on the stable, southern headland to gain the shoreline. Two stake anchors driven into the top of the landward cliff secured the ropes for this end. From the small and boulder-strewn beach, the stack was scaled directly up its landward face. A fixed rope was then secured up the route for the rest of the fieldwork. The route was protected using climbing techniques to fix rock



Illus 7 Stac a' Chaisteal from the south



Illus 8 Access onto Stac a' Chaisteal from the south



Illus 9 Access onto Stac a' Chaisteal with descending sheep from the south

anchors and pitons into appropriate cracks in the rock (illus 8 and 9).

The success of the access was dependent upon finding solid rock to provide safe anchors and had this not been discovered the stack would not have been climbed. Any loose rock encountered on or around the route had to be dislodged to ensure continuing safety.

7.4 Previous work

The earliest documentary evidence for Stac a' Chaisteal comes from the Ordnance Survey Name Book of 1852, which described it as: 'A small ruin, said to be the remains of a castle, with a considerable portion of the wall still standing.' ([Ordnance Survey Name Book 1852](#).)

The next mention in the NMRS is again from the Ordnance Survey, this time in 1969 during the course of their 1:10,000 map survey. It is obvious the team managed to access the stack because of the detail recorded:

On Stac a' Chaisteal there is the much reduced and overgrown remains of a galleried dun or

semi-broch. It consists of a substantial stone wall measuring *c* 13m in length and *c* 4.5m in width, and pierced by a central entrance passage 1.1m in width, placed on the lip of a cliff across the eroded ridge joining the promontory to the mainland.

The west half of the wall has fallen into the sea, but the footings of the outer wall face and entrance-passage survive. The outer wall face of the E half has a considerable batter, and reaches a maximum height of 1.8m. at the SE corner.

The inner wall face is vertical, 0.9m in height, and pierced by a lintelled entrance, 0.8m in width, which leads into the remains of a cell too ruinous to be properly examined.

Within the enclosed area, measuring *c* 13m N/S by 10m transversely, there are traces of other structures, of which only one can be recognised as an oval corbelled chamber, about 3.3m E/W by 2.3m transversely, with a lintelled entrance in its N wall. [Surveyed at 1:10,000, visited by Ordnance Survey (AA) 20 June 1969.]

The site was also described by the Coastal Erosion Assessment, Lewis ([Burgess & Church 1997](#)) and was considered in subsequent and related work



Illus 10 Stac a' Chaisteal Structure A from the east. Scale 1.2 m long.



Illus 11 Stac a' Chaisteal Structure B from the south. Scale 1.2 m long.

(Burgess 2000; Burgess 1999). Burgess described the construction of the site in his PhD:

. . . one promontory enclosure, Stac a' Chaisteal, appears to be constructed using techniques similar to that seen in complex Atlantic round houses, using flat slabs of stone to produce a blockhouse structure, apparently with an intra-mural space. While the structural similarities may be a result of no more than the use of the same building materials, the final effect at Stac a' Chaisteal must have been monumental, visually similar to the large complex Atlantic round houses, presenting a large featureless surface punctuated only by a small entrance. (Burgess 2000, 130)

Although the site was not accessed during this work, he noted that it was examined closely with binoculars from all sides, and appeared to be of linear rather than circular construction, and having ' . . . either rooms, cells or an intra-mural space within the thickness of its wall' (*ibid*, 250).

7.5 The survey

The structure described by Burgess above formed a linear and large dry-stone rectangular wall or

blockhouse running along the southern extremities of the site. This enclosed at least six other structures on top of the stack, within a small oval area measuring $c 30 \times 15\text{m}$, about two thirds of the summit. These structures consisted of curving lines of turf-covered wall footings, supported by revetment walls at the cliff edge. The remaining third of the summit was an outcrop of bedrock running along the western side of the summit, a couple of metres higher than the archaeological structures (*illus 6*).

The structures are described here from north to south, with their phasing discussed at the end.

Structure A

On the seaward or northern face of the stack, the turf and stone footings of a curved, double-skinned, drystone wall abutted an outcrop of rock and then ran along the top of a north-facing cliff for $c 3\text{m}$ before terminating at the easy angled grassy slope of a natural terrace (*illus 10*). The wall was $c 0.4\text{m}$ thick and is constructed of blocks of Lewisian gneiss, which measure on average $c 200\text{mm}$ long \times 200mm wide.

A small but regular break of slope immediately uphill of Structure A may have represented a further wall or revetment built into the slope.



Illus 12 Stac a' Chaisteal Structure C from the west. Scale 1.2 m long.

Structure B

Approximately 8m upslope and to the south-west of Structure A, resting upon another outcrop of rock, were the horseshoe-shaped foundations of another double-skinned, drystone-walled enclosure (Structure B), which opened to the south. This was slightly more substantial than Structure A. It measured roughly 4 × 4m in plan, with walls 0.5m thick (*illus 11*).

Structure C

Structure C was also horseshoe-shaped and opened to the south. It measured 5m N/S by 4m E/W internally. The wall rested upon and covered the whole of an outcrop of rock (*illus 12*).

The foundations of the structure were constructed of large slabs of gneiss measuring up to 1 × 0.2–0.7m, with a wall thickness of *c* 1m. The walls were more heavily built than the two structures previously described, and belonged to a more substantial building. Only one course of walling was visible along its length, but the south-east wall end to the structure revealed at least three courses of stonework, which showed signs of corbelling.

The west wall of this building continued further to the south than the east wall, and ended squarely with two courses of large gneiss blocks, which may have been one side of a doorway. The opposing wall

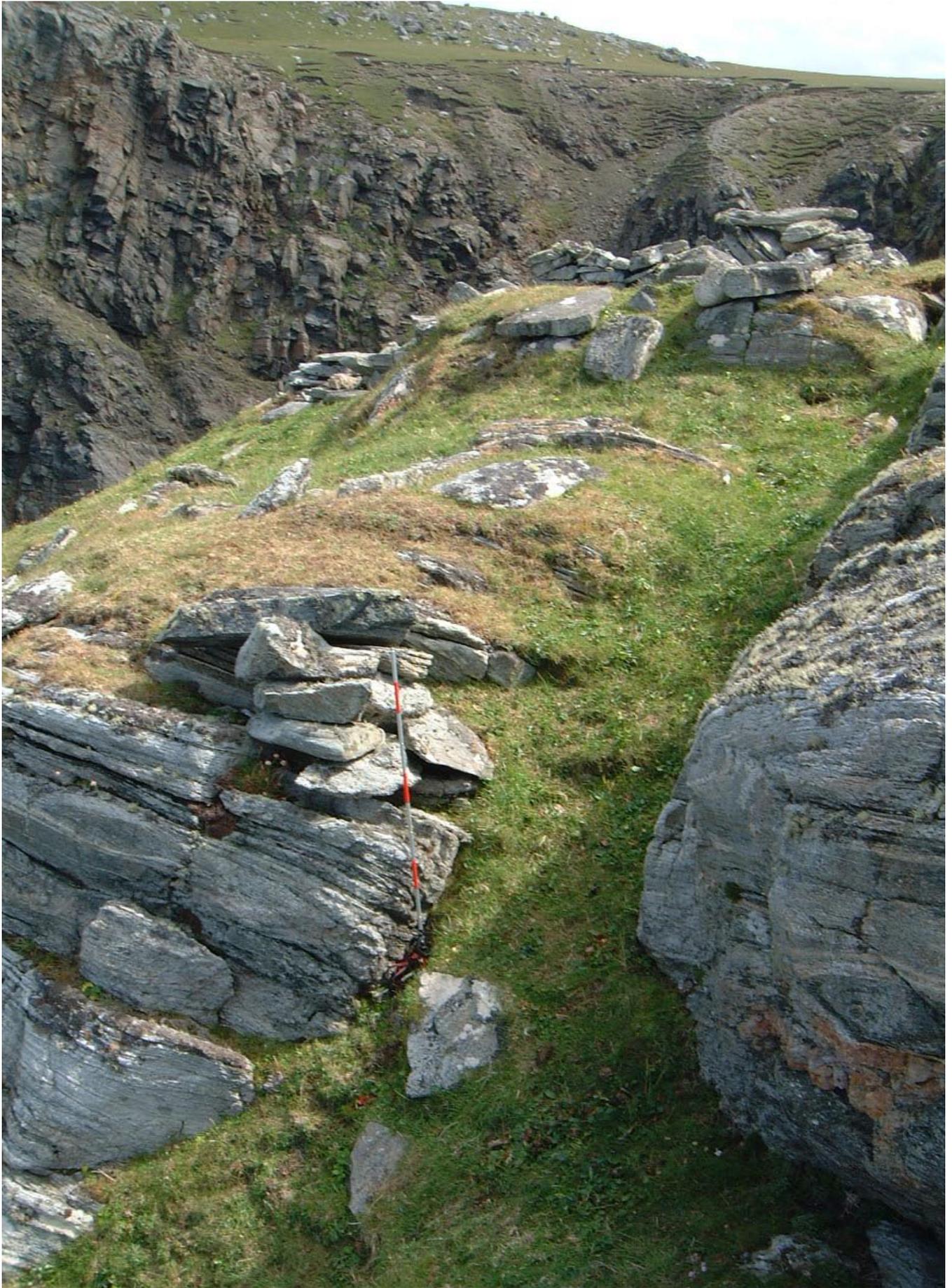
may have been represented by Structure K, a linear grassy bank with the same alignment that lay 1m beyond the wall termination.

Structure D

To the north of Structure C and running along the west side of Structure B was a short pathway set into a natural fissure between two rock outcrops. This measured *c* 1m wide, was orientated N/S, with the outcrop to the west 1.5m high. Although the outcrop to the east was lower, it had been accentuated by the construction of a roughly built section of drystone walling (*illus 13*). This formed a natural passage, and may have been used to gain access to the site from the seaward side of the stack.

The section of walling was perched on the edge of the outcrop and was right-angled, with faces to the north and east. It was constructed of large gneiss slabs, measured *c* 0.5 × 0.5m, and survived to a height of 0.7m. This may have been the east jamb of a doorway, and could have held a lintel, although there were no obvious marks or signs of quarrying of the rock face to the west.

A similar passageway accentuated by drystone walling running parallel to the east of Structure B was also noted, but this was not as convincing as Structure D.



Illus 13 Stac a' Chaisteal Structure D from the north-west. Scale 1.2 m long.



Illus 14 Stac a' Chaisteal Structure E from the south-east. Scale 1.2 m long.

Structure E

Structure E is a drystone, beehive-shaped, corbelled cell, which measured $c 4 \times 4\text{m}$. It was constructed of a single face of large gneiss slabs attaining over 1m in length and, although the wall had large gaps throughout, it has survived to a height of 0.5m or four courses above present ground level (*illus 14*). The cell vaulted sharply inward over these four courses from an inside diameter of $c 3.6\text{--}1.4\text{m}$ at its full height.

The cell had two openings. One entrance was on the west side and was well-constructed but partially collapsed, including its lintel. It was 0.3m high and 0.6m wide. A passage leading to the entrance was formed by the eastern wall end of Structure C and an opposing wall at right angles to this.

The second entrance was in the north of the cell, where a 0.5m wide by 0.4m high opening led into a 1m long passage flanked by stone orthostats. This passage is in a derelict state but would have been roofed, judging by the amount of masonry tumble present.

Structure F

Structure F consisted of three separate, but possibly related, features described as F(a), (b) and (c). The

first, Structure F(a), comprised two courses of a drystone, double-skinned wall, of large $c 0.6 \times 0.3 \times 0.3\text{m}$ rectangular blocks, partially turfed over. It was $c 0.8\text{m}$ wide and stretched 3m E/W on the south-west of the stack (*illus 15*). The western end was partially collapsed and had fallen over the edge of the stack.

Structure F(b) was a short length of turfed-over stone walling, running parallel and 2m to the north of F(a). A 2m long stone slab, possibly a lintel, lay along this wall. An ephemeral turf- and stone-line joined the north-east end of F(b), and ran N/S, parallel to the west end of Structure G. F(b) and (c) together enclosed a small area to the west of the stack, with the north side formed by a rock outcrop.

Structure G

Structure G is described in two parts. G(a) was a substantial wall and footing of up to 4 courses high, surviving 5.5m long and at least 0.9m thick, running NW/SE, to the south of, and slightly out of alignment, with Structure F. The wall was of drystone construction and consisted of massive $1 \times 0.5\text{m}$ rectangular blocks of stone. It may have been of double-faced construction, given its width, but only the outer face was visible. A batter was



Illus 15 Stac a' Chaisteal Structure F from the east

apparent over its height, similar to that seen in Structure H (see below).

Both Structure F and Structure G(a) have jagged western ends where it is clear that they are falling into the sea; some of their courses overhung the cliff face.

At its eastern end, Structure G(b) may have been the same as the foundations of a wall running N/S, parallel to the west wall of Structure H (illus 16). The structure ran for approximately 5m, and was constructed of blocks of the same size and character as Structure G(a), but other dimensions were unclear due to vegetation cover.

Structure H

Structure H was the most substantial and best preserved building on the stack, surviving in places up to eight courses or 2m in height. It was sub-rectangular in plan and measured 6 × 4m. A substantial batter was apparent on what remains of the south, landward-facing wall. The building stood across the south-eastern neck of the stack, blocking access to its interior. Most of its southern and western wall sections were collapsing into the sea, but the eastern wall and the south-eastern corner

were well preserved and remained perched on the edge of a 40m-high cliff (illus 17 and 18)

The north wall survived intact to a height of 1.5m to its roof stones. It formed an internal gallery which possibly turned south to follow the east wall of the structure. An entrance, 0.8m wide with a triangular lintel (illus 19), and a mere 0.3m higher than the present ground surface, was present in its outer wall. It opened directly onto the internal gallery. No other entrance was visible.

An obvious passage was formed between Structure H to the east, and Structures F and G to the west (illus 16 above). This was described by the Ordnance Survey as the entrance passage to a massive structure spanning the whole width of the stack, an interpretation that was supported by this survey.

The passage measured 1.1m in width and extended along the entire width of Structure H. Unfortunately, the outward threshold of the passage had collapsed to the east (H) and is no longer present to the west (G) so it is not known what kind of doorway might have existed. An eroded beach pebble hammerstone was found in the tumble from the wall to the east of this passage (SF1).



Illus 16 Stac a' Chaisteal Structure G from the north-west. Scale 1.2 m long.

Structure I

Structure I was the large modern cairn situated upon the highest point of the stack. Cairns like these are found all over the coast of Lewis as navigation aids to fishermen. It is not known when this one was constructed.

Structure J

In the middle of Structure C was a stone construction c 1.5m high by 1m long and 0.5 m. wide. It consisted of two rough piles of stone slabs with a larger, flat slab on top (to the right in [illus 12](#) above). The construction was so poor that it gave the impression of being very recent in origin, and did not seem to relate to the other structures. It is known that within living memory young men would challenge each other to ascend this and other stacks (D R MacLeod, Gearrannan, pers comm) and would build something to prove their exploit. This may be one such construction.

Structure K

A grassed-over linear mound that could be the remains of a wall measuring 0.9m wide ran 1.7m N/S from the southern end of Structure E ([illus 6](#)).

Structure L

Running between Structure E and the north-eastern corner of H were the ephemeral remains of another possible wall, c 1m wide by 1.7m long. This may have been a continuation to the south of the eastern



Illus 17 Stac a' Chaisteal SE corner of Structure H from south-east



Illus 18 Stac a' Chaisteal NE corner of Structure H from the north. Scale 0.4 m long.

wall of Structure C, subsequently obscured by the construction of Structure E.

Structure M

A substantial revetment wall measuring 2m high and c 6m long underlay and supported structures E, L and H. It was built along the south-eastern flank of the stack (*illus 20*). This may have related to the earliest phase of construction on the stack. It sealed a steep gully draining water away from the summit plateau onto its eastern face. It was well preserved, with no evidence of subsidence or collapse.

7.6 Discussion

The buildings on Stac a' Chaisteal fell into three distinct groups. The first group includes the curvilinear, double-faced foundations of structures A, B and C, which closely followed and respected the shape of the stack. Structure D may also have been contemporary with these structures as it was positioned along a natural path leading from one structure

to another. These buildings were protected from the prevailing south-west weather by the rock outcrop forming the summit of the stack.

Structure A may have represented no more than an open-ended section of walling, similar to that found in Structure D, rather than the remains of a building. The relationship of this to the alteration or enhancement of natural passageways by the construction of drystone walling (Structure D) implied the importance of movement between the top of the stack and the seaward face. The seaward face was actually more easily angled for access than the rocky and exposed landward one and contained many little grassy terraces. Time and logistical problems did not allow a fuller survey of these terraces, but they may have been an integral part of the site as a whole.

Structures B and C were closely related, with B interpreted as an extension to the larger building C. They were very similar in construction.

Structure C may have been a large, 12m-long oval building, incorporating isolated walls at its southern end (Structures K and L), and pre-dating



Illus 19 Stac a' Chaisteal triangular lintel Structure H from the north. Scale 1.2 m long.

the standing building to the south (Structure H). Certainly Structures K and L continued on the same alignment as C, and appeared to run underneath Structure H.

The second group of buildings was represented by Structure E. It had a completely different style of construction from the previously described buildings, having a single face of long, thin slabs corbelled inwards to form a roof. The large holes throughout its construction implied that the building was probably covered in turf, as it certainly could not have provided shelter otherwise. It also had two entrances, one of which was blocked.

These architectural components are found in the ubiquitous Hebridean beehive-shaped shielings (eg [Thomas 1859](#)), and although they are predominantly found in inland, upland locations, there are some found on maritime island locations (Loch Roag, J Crawford pers comm). These shielings have a lengthy period of use. Structure E was assumed to be the latest phase of building on the site.

The third distinct group of buildings was characterised by that of Structure H, which was presumably

part of a larger building incorporating the wall footings of Structures G and F. It contrasted with the other buildings by dominating the stack, and using the powerfully physical nature of the rock pinnacle. The intention of its construction would not only have been for defence, but to impress.

This structure has been identified previously as being a blockhouse ([Burgess 1999](#)), being almost identical to the blockhouses described by Lamb on Shetland ([Lamb 1980](#), [Mowbray 1936](#)). If Structures F, G and H were all part of the same original building, then Structure G(b) would have been half of the central entrance passage and Structures F(a) and F(b) could have been part of a corresponding intra-mural gallery to match that in Structure H. The substantial foundation wall of Structure G(a) was angled acutely to Structure F, almost mirroring the shape of Structure H. The building would in effect be a massive cordon-wall stretching across the neck of rock.

Lamb ([1980](#)) discussed other sites with evidence of habitation immediately behind the blockhouse, possibly similar to Stac a' Chaisteal. He also



Illus 20 Stac a' Chaisteal revetment M from the north. Scale 1.2 m long.

noted that some Shetland blockhouses (eg Burgi Geos on the island of Yell) are located amid large expanses of unproductive blanket bog, in contrast to the Lewis sites, which appear to be located on the margins of coastal settlement areas. However, many more of the Shetland sites are inaccessible from the sea, or positioned in areas of treacherous seaward approach, as at Stac a' Chaisteal. Lamb saw no strategic value in the Shetland blockhouse at all (Lamb 1980, 69), and certainly these marginal sitings indicate that these were not conventional farming settlements, but must have been dependent upon agricultural production from other areas. In Shetland a further problem concerning defence is that many of the blockhouses appear not to have blocked the whole promontory, leaving a gap for easy access. In contrast, Structure H appeared to block the whole neck of land, but changes due to erosion may have altered its relationship to the area of the promontory. Although some structures on Stac a' Chaisteal may have been defensive they may also have had status.

7.7. Potential for future work

This site had many complex and well-preserved structural remains on it. The main problem encountered there in terms of erosion and collapse was different from other stack sites. On Stac a' Chaisteal there are no exposed and eroding soil layers as its plateau is above the reach of most wave action. The deterioration to the archaeological remains is caused by the undermining of structural remains, which collapse as the underlying rock gives way. Structures G, H and M are threatened in this way as they are perched on the very edge of the stack. Any future work on this site should concentrate on recording as much of these structures as possible, by standing building survey, including drawn elevations and detailed photographs of all aspects of the buildings.

Possible trial trenching over the other structures may be possible in order to assess the quality and depth of deposits, and recover suitable samples for environmental and dating analysis.