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# 11 EILEAN NAN LUCHRUBAN

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## 11.1 Physical description and location (*illus 38*)

The stack or small island of Eilean nan Luchruban or Pygmies Isle (NGR: NB 5078 6600; NMRS no. NB56NW 4; SAM 5878) lies approximately 1km south-west of the Butt of Lewis. The area is characterised by high, incised cliffs of Lewisian metasediment (Burgess & Church 1997, 283).

The stack itself is a cliff-bound island, separated from the mainland by a chasm *c* 30m high and 50m wide. The slightly rounded surface of the island is heavily overgrown with turf and *Armeria maritima* which, ungrazed, forms cushions and tussocks varying in height from *c* 0.2–0.5m, masking the surface of the stack and the contours of the structural remains. The plants are not strongly rooted and are vulnerable to damage from walking. The edges of the stack are used by nesting sea birds, but in 2003 there were a few nests on the upper surface of the stack.

In the seventeenth century there was a narrow neck of land joining the island to the mainland of Lewis (Dymes 1630). A structure was visible sunk into the north-eastern corner of the island, at the point of access. This was the structure excavated in

the nineteenth century (see Section 11.4), which at the time of the survey was suffering from indirect erosion as a result of collapse of the edges of the open hollow.

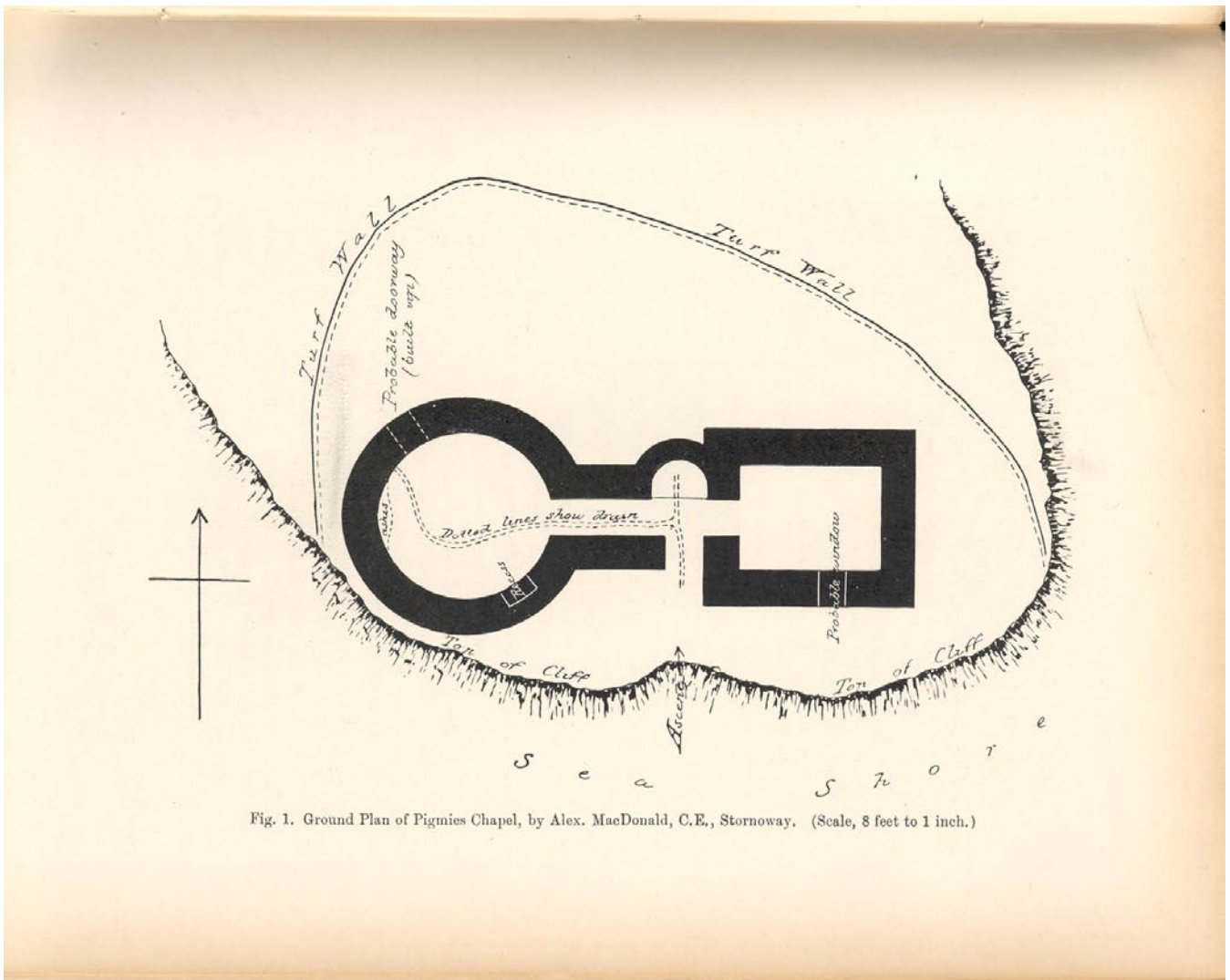
## 11.2 Erosion

The coastline from Traigh Sanda around the Butt of Lewis to Port of Ness is considered to be actively eroding in the Coastal Erosion Assessment, Lewis (Burgess & Church, 1997, 283–4). There is active erosion on the landward edge of the stack and particularly on the adjacent mainland cliffs by the access point to the stack. Here large rock falls are evidence of recent erosion. The seaward side of the island appeared to be stable.

The Ordnance Survey noted a general deterioration of the exposed structure on the top of the stack when they surveyed the site in 1969. They considered that the structures were ‘much less visible’ when compared to an earlier RCAHMS plan of 1928 (RCAHMS 1928, 9). Evaluation of these two surveys suggests that the deterioration has occurred to the internal structure of the building, perhaps by



*Illus 38 Eilean nan Luchruban from the south*



Illus 39 Mackenzie's plan of Eilean nan Luchruban

animal or human agency, rather than to the outer edge adjacent to the cliff line.

The nature and severity of this erosion is, however, not of immediate concern. The main structures are on the sheltered, landward side of the stack, away from the full force of the Atlantic Ocean, and it is unlikely that large parts of the site would be lost in the near future, although slow decay will continue.

### 11.3 Access

Access entailed an initial 1km walk, followed by an easy, angled 30m descent on fixed ropes attached to stakes driven into the ground. The base of the chasm between the mainland and stack is above most high water levels, so it was possible to walk across to the foot of the stack. From here a 20m ascent gained access to the summit. The initial ascent was made using climbing techniques with natural rock anchors. Two stakes were then fixed as far from the visible archaeology as was possible and static ropes

anchored from these. On the final retreat, the stakes were lifted and the last descent made, again using climbing techniques with natural rock anchors.

The main risk at Luchruban was from loose blocks of stone around or above the descent route on the landward side, which were potentially very dangerous. This risk was controlled by choosing the most solid route down, and then dislodging all loose rock from above and around this route.

### 11.4 Previous work

Eilean nan Luchruban (the Pigmies Isle) was first mentioned by Dean Munro in about 1549. He was made aware of the site from the reports made by earlier investigators, although no references are known for these (Mackenzie 1905, 248). He described the site as being a 'kirk' where pygmies were buried. There are several references to the island throughout the following centuries. Captain Dymes investigated the remains in the 1630s, and John Morrison of

South Bragar mentions the site in 1680 (MacGregor 1967, 178; Robson 2004, 19). Martin Martin also notes the place in his accounts at the end of the 17th century, although it is doubtful whether he visited the site. A full description of these visits and reports has been undertaken elsewhere (MacGregor 1967; Robson 2004). It is important to note, however, that the site appears to have become infamous due to its association with the local tradition that it was once inhabited by 'pygmies'.

William Cook Mackenzie commented upon various excavations carried out on the site, and published a detailed account of those undertaken by his brother and his cousin (Mackenzie 1905, 248–58). He describes a semi-subterranean rectangular building visible on the surface of the stack, and attached by a passage to a circular structure, the interior length of the whole complex being 24' 9" (c 8m; *ibid*, 253). A stone-lined drain ran under the structure of the buildings. The whole complex was surrounded by an enclosure wall (*illus 39*).

The Mackenzie excavations yielded five sherds of pottery; a base, three body sherds and a rim (*ibid*, 252), the latter four of which were identified by R B K Stevenson (1946, 141) as Neolithic in date. The base was interpreted as being of more recent date. There is scant stratigraphic evidence for the location of the material, which came from the interface between a dark loam and a layer of sea sand within the rectangular building (Mackenzie 1905, 252).

A plan of the site was published in the RCAHMS Inventory of 1928 (site 22, 9), and was resurveyed at a scale of 1:2500 by the Ordnance Survey in 1969. It was also included in the coastal surveys conducted in 1978 and 1996 (Cowie 1995; Burgess & Church 1996).

Recent survey work around the site has uncovered the possible remains of several standing stones, which may be associated with the prehistoric activities on the island, and which are to be investigated in more detail in forthcoming work (Barrowman, C S 2007, 29–32; Barrowman, C S forthcoming a) and b)).

### 11.5 The survey (*illus 40*)

There is a stone-built structure partly dug into the south-east corner of the island, immediately adjacent to the access route used by the survey. An enclosure wall runs around this structure, and there are two slight hollows to the north of this, which may represent further remains below the thick vegetation. Because of the vegetation growth, referred structural measurements below are approximate.

#### Structure A

Structure A was the building identified in the past by Dean Munro as a chapel, and it formed the eastern part of the whole structure. This rectangular but much collapsed and overgrown building was orientated E/W and was semi-subterranean (*illus 41*).

Its internal measurements were approximately 2 × 2.5m. One clearly defined drystone wallface survived a maximum of six courses on the SW-facing side (*illus 42*). The opposing wall formed a curve of loose, irregular stone and was partially obscured by vegetation. This appeared to have been rebuilt recently, and may have been the result of reconstruction of the building after excavation in the early 1900s. There was no sign of the passage exit connecting this structure to Structure B.

Three plain sherds of pottery were recovered from this building, two body sherds and one base sherd. They came from an eroding scar north of the internal wall and are late prehistoric or later in date (see *Appendix 3*). A hammerstone was also recovered from a further eroding scar in the northern wall, although at a higher point, and it is possible that this came from the backfill of Mackenzie's excavations. Three probable struck quartz flakes were also found.

#### Structure B

Structure B was the circular building described by Mackenzie (1905, 252). Its form appeared to be slightly oval, with a long axis orientated N/S, but the structure was much overgrown and collapsed. On the north-eastern edge of Structure B, a wall corner was visible, presumably the north-western edge of the passage which joined Structures A and B. There was no longer any sign of the drain described by Mackenzie (*ibid*, 253).

#### Structure C

Structure C lay to the west of A and B, and consisted of a slight, oval concavity, which may have been structural, in the terracing of the island surface. It measured 3 × 4m.

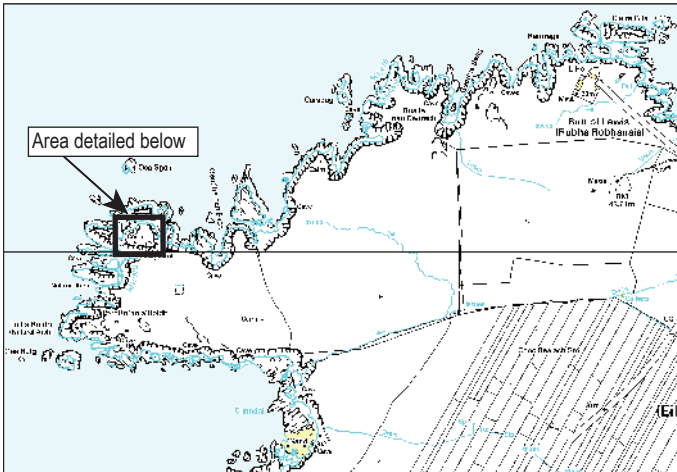
#### Structure D

Structure D was another slight, circular concavity to the north-east of Structure C, with traces of a possible retaining drystone wall around its northern edge and a large stone slab along its eastern edge. It measured c 4m in diameter and was heavily overgrown.

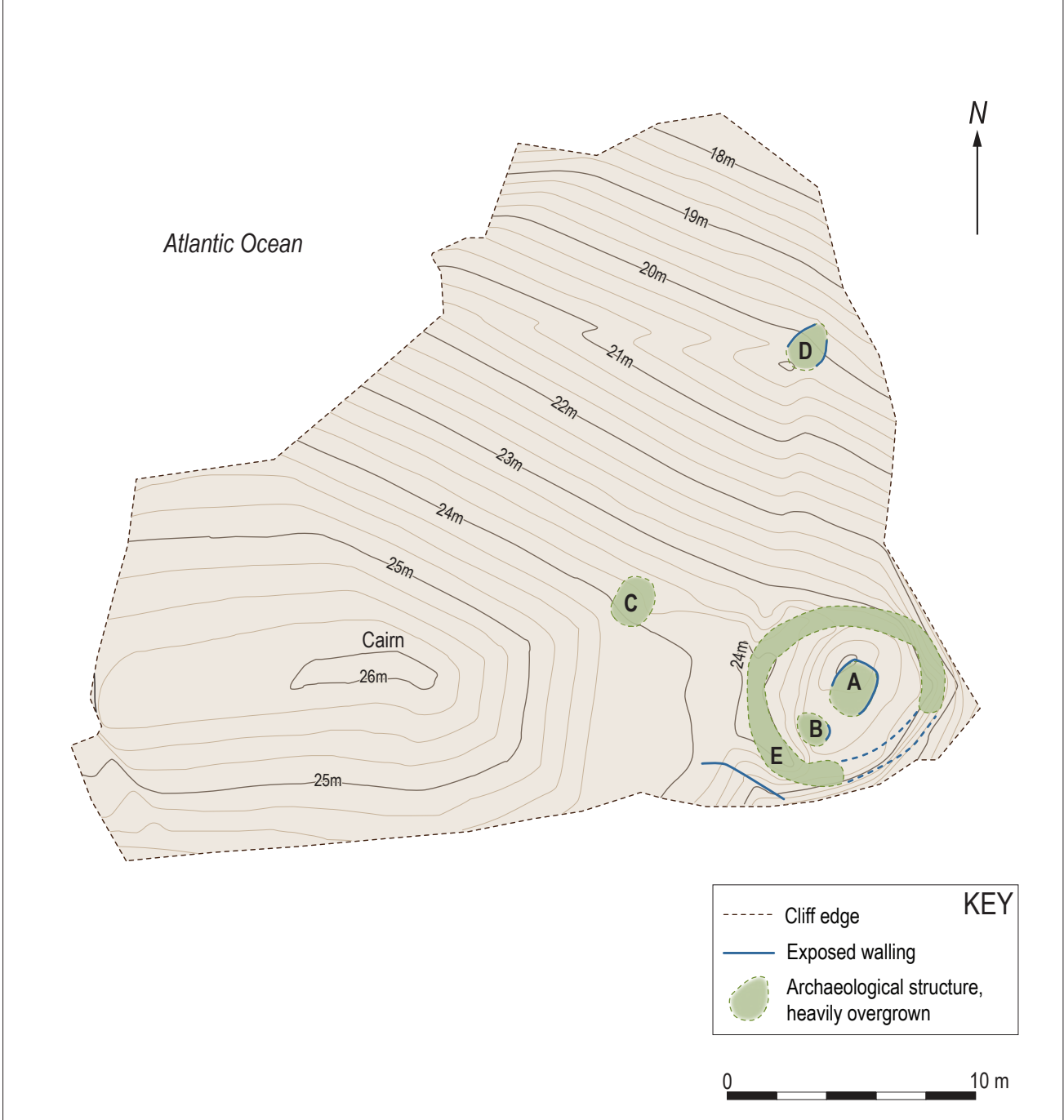
#### Structure E

The enclosing wall shown on Mackenzie's plan (*illus 39*) was a circular wall, running around the north-west side of Structures A and B, and to the north-east of Structure A before reaching the cliff edge, and curving around to the south-east. There was a small break of c 2m in the wall at this point which was used by Mackenzie and STAC as the access route. The wall began again to the south of Structure B, and curved round the south-west and west sides of this before joining its northern extent (*illus 40*).

The wall seemed to form an external wall to Structures A and B where it abutted them to the north-east, east, south and south-west, and enclosed an overgrown but slightly concave area to the north and north-west. The entire wall was circular in plan,



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*Illus 41 (above) General view of Structure A, Eilean nan Luchruban from the north*

*Illus 42 (right) Walling of Structure A, Eilean nan Luchruban from the south*

and measured c 12m in diameter, and was 1.5m broad on average. No stone work was visible, given the thick vegetation cover, although there were some eroding faces to the south and south-west, outside and downslope of the wall, which showed coursed stonework. This indicated the extent of the archaeology to be at least 4m from Structure A.

### *11.6 Discussion*

On the basis of an early tradition of a chapel referred to by Dean Munro in 1549, this stack has been identified for many years as an early Christian oratory or hermitage (eg **Thomas 1971**, 85–6). There is, however, no place name evidence for such an attribution, which may have derived



*Illus 40 (opposite) Location map and topographic survey of Eilean nan Luchruban*

from the finding of bones on the site (Mackenzie 1905, 248–9). There is also no supporting archaeological evidence for an ecclesiastical function, and the presence of Neolithic pottery provides a very positive prehistoric dating. Whilst an earlier occupation does not preclude an early Christian presence, the lack of evidence for the latter means that the traditional interpretation of the site should be reassessed.

There is also a major difference between the survey produced in this report, and that published by Mackenzie (1905, *illus* 39). Where the original plan shows two compartments joined by a passage, orientated E/W, and enclosed by a turf wall, the

STAC survey shows that the enclosure wall is more substantial and circular, enclosing the building formed by Structures A and B. Although the shape of the internal structures is hard to discern, and there is only one visible wall face, the rectangular structure it represents is aligned NE/SW, and runs parallel to the enclosing wall at its south-east side. Indeed, the one visible internal face may correspond to the internal face of the enclosure wall, and when this is considered along with the circular form of the outer wall, the whole structure gives the impression of a roundhouse. Perhaps the passage described by MacKenzie was part of a gallery, now either hidden or destroyed.