9 DUNASBROC

9.1 Physical description and location

Dunasbroc (NGR: NB 4713 6215, NMRS no. NB46SE 19) is located near Aird Dell in the township of South Dell, parish of Barvas, on the west coast of Ness, Isle of Lewis (illus 1).

It is a small, steep-sided, conical stack situated close to shore and linked to it via a low ramp of rock even at high tide. It is *c* 20m tall and *c* 40m in diameter at its base, with a flat summit platform measuring *c* 6 × 15m. The landward south-west-facing side of the stack is the only area to retain soil and vegetation, the side exposed to the sea being scoured to bare rock. There are no obvious structures at first inspection, but sections of well-made yet slight drystone walling are exposed in many places (Burgess & Church 1997, 266–7).

The adjacent coastline is characterised by high, impassable cliffs, although immediately opposite Dunasbroc a large concave grassy slope makes access to the shore easy and creates a natural amphitheatre setting for the stack. To the south of the site, the cliff-line becomes lower lying and is punctuated by sandy beaches. The hinterland is a mixture of improved moorland and moor; the coastal areas are currently grazed. There are larger areas of peat moorland a few hundred metres from the coast to the south-east towards Aird Dell, and to the south along Dibidale Burn.

This moorland preserves a relict multi-period landscape, with sub-peat enclosure walls and stone structures appearing through peat cutting (Barrowman, C S 2006, 19; Barrowman, C S 2007, 33). Numerous artefacts dating from the Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age and Norse periods have been recovered in the area over the past 100 years, indicating that the area was once populated and the land worked before the formation of the peat. The Dell River, slightly over 1km to the north, is the largest river north of Barvas and would have been a major fishing resource. It also provides easy access to the interior loch fishing and summer grazing areas.

The local geology is a rock platform of Lewisian gneiss supporting low cliffs of till, glacial sands and gravels with marine deposits (Burgess & Church 1997, 273–4). Behind the site is a raised beach (Angus 1997, 274).

9.2 Erosion

Dunasbroc is situated in a 'generally eroding' coastal erosion cell (Burgess & Church 1997, 270). The CEAL survey concluded that periodic monitoring of this zone is recommended.

The landward side of the platform on the top of the stack retains topsoil and archaeological features, but is actively eroding through many open scars, whilst the seaward side has been completely scoured down to bare rock.

The rock itself is not eroding quickly, as no loose angular blocks or cliff scars were noted. All of the fallen boulders on the nearby shore are rounded and weathered, indicating a long presence there. It is therefore specifically erosion of the vegetation, soils and archaeological deposits that is of primary concern rather than the underlying geology or access to the stack.

9.3 Access

Safe access to Dunasbroc (illus 24) was relatively straightforward compared with other sites in the project. It was possible to walk down the grassy landward slope to the rock ramp situated at the foot of the stack. This ramp is approximately 5m above sea level, and so is accessible even at high tide.

A difficult and exposed ledge then wound clockwise from the base of the stack following a natural line of weakness in the rock created by quartz-rich veins. This path included a 0.4m wide ledge, which had to be traversed for 3–4m before gaining an easier angled ridge which could be followed back anti-clockwise to gain the summit platform area.

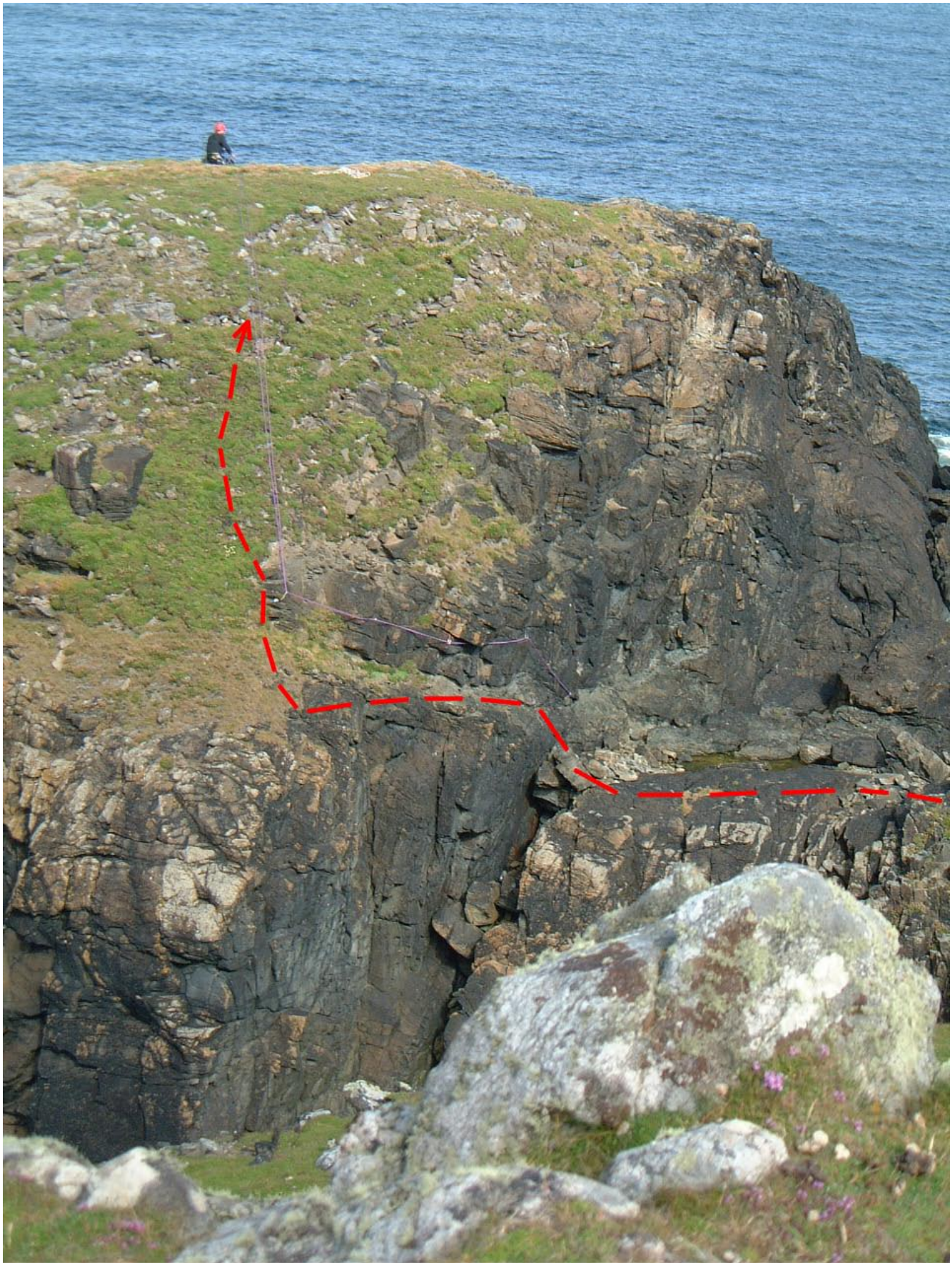
From the ramp, climbing techniques and rock anchors enabled safe access along the ledge and up the ridge. Once on the summit, permanent bolt type anchors were used to fix ropes for the rest of the team for the duration of the excavation.

Final egress took place using pull-through abseiling techniques whereby each rope can be retrieved from the base of the abseil by using a double rope length.

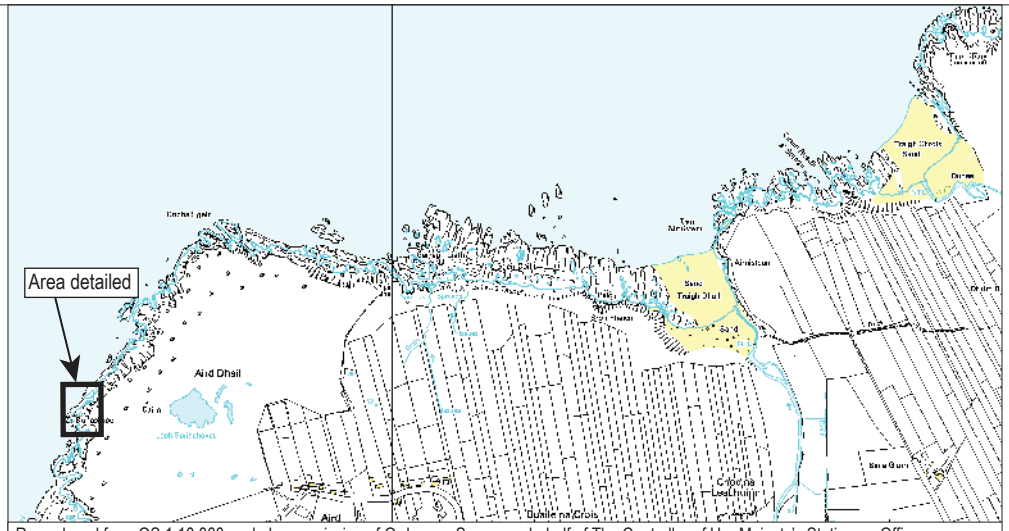
9.4 Previous work

Dunasbroc was wrongly positioned on the 1852 1st edition Ordnance Survey map, an error which has subsequently been copied onto every edition except the most recent, when the place-name was correctly moved south by 150m. The NMRS entry reads:

> Dunasbroc, pointed out at NB 4713 6200, and wrongly positioned on O.S. 6″ 1965, is a conical stack, on which a fragment of low walling can be seen, apparently constructed of quite small, poor quality stones, unlike the wall footing of a dun. [Ordnance Survey (NKB), 16 June 1969]



Illus 24 Dunasbroc access from the west



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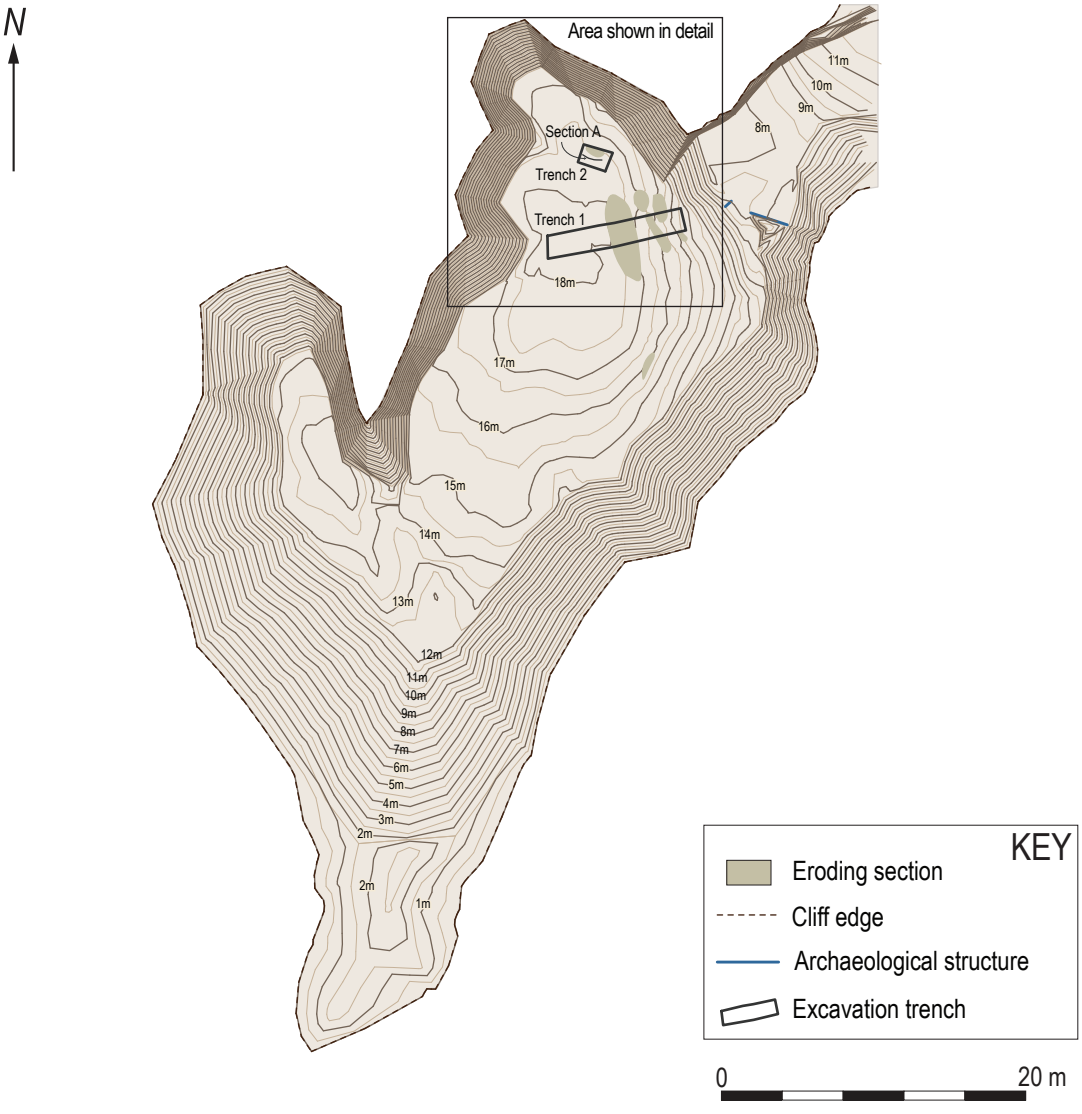
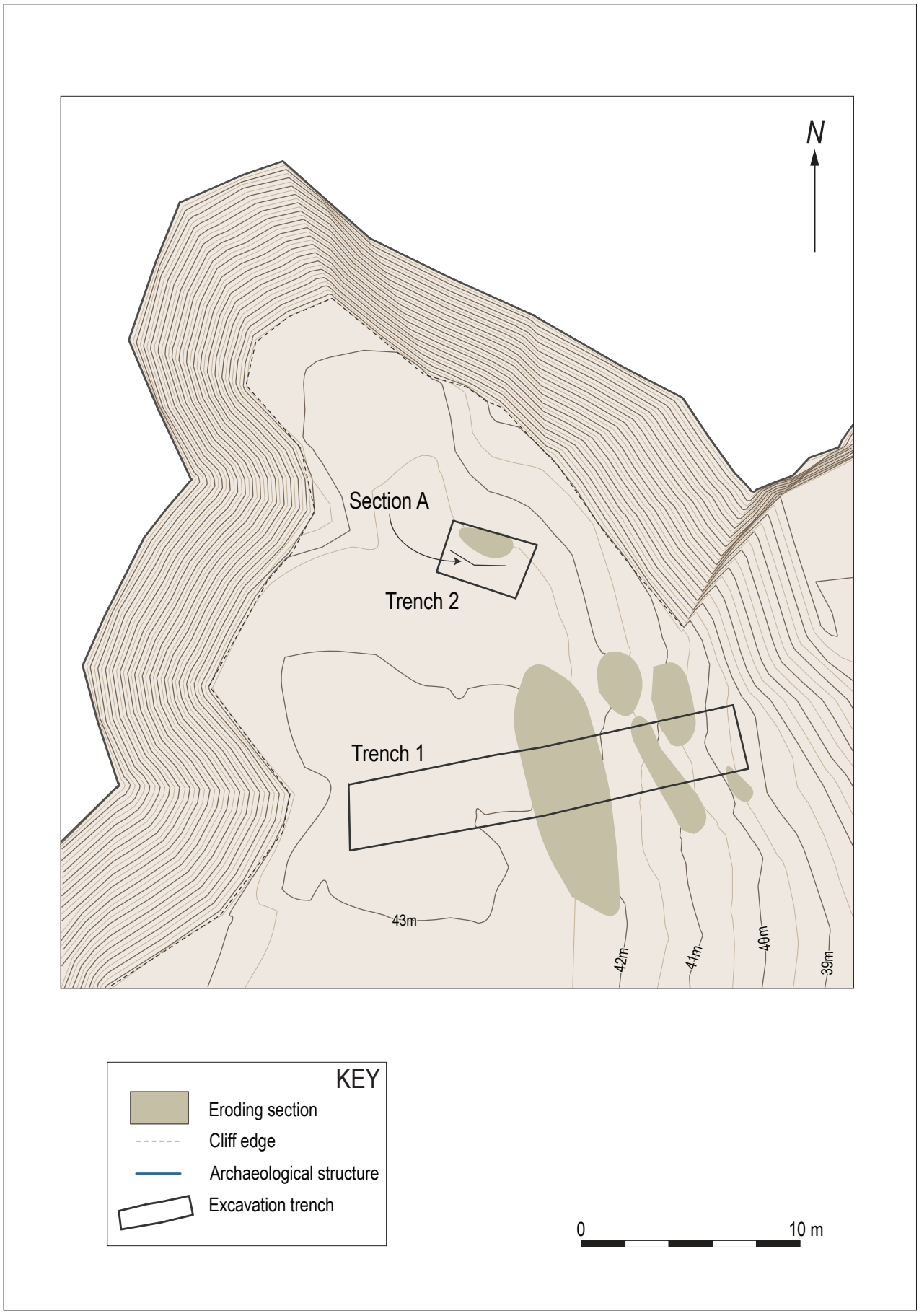


Illus 25 Location map and topographic survey of Dunasbroc



Illus 26 Map of trenches on top of Dunasbroc

Illus 27 Erosion scar A, Dunasbroc from the east. Scale 0.3 m long.

The site was also noted during the coastal survey undertaken by the Central Excavation Unit in 1978 (Cowie 1995), and by the more recent coastal survey in 1996 (Burgess & Church 1997, 266), where it is described as being a stack with an enclosure wall.

9.5 The survey

There were no obvious structures on the stack, but archaeological deposits were visible in a series of eroding scars. These scars were scattered through many little ramps and terraces on the steepest, landward face (illus 25). Close examination showed the terraces to be supported by walls and revetments, often running along the contours of the stack and making use of natural outcrops.

Each eroding scar has been identified by a letter, beginning from the north. Their locations are marked on illus 26.

Erosion Scar A

A small, 0.3 × 1m, east-facing section yielded ceramic sherds, unworked quartz chips and pebbles, small flecks of charcoal and two rough 300mm-long slabs of gneiss (illus 27). The soil consisted of very compact, almost concreted silty sand, varying from light grey and shell-rich at the top to darker brown organic-rich lower down, without any distinct context change and with charcoal flecks throughout. Sherds of pottery were also found throughout.

Approximately 100mm below the top of the scar, within the lighter coloured sediments and towards the south end, two large decorated body sherds of carinated pottery and one rim sherd were discovered, lying laterally and very close to each other as if smashed in situ (SF8, discussed below).

Erosion Scar B

This large scar on the south-east face of the stack measured *c* 6m in length by *c* 2m high. It consisted mostly of a mixture of bedrock and tumbled stone slabs, measuring on average *c* 300 × 500mm. There were two distinct soil layers, the uppermost being similar to that of section A. The lower was a grey-brown, compact silt, which contained occasional pottery sherds, charcoal lumps and broken shells throughout, and was damaged significantly by

Illus 28 Walling in erosion scar D, Dunasbroc from the east. Scale 0.3 m long.

rabbit burrows. It also contained lumps of quartz measuring *c* 20–30mm and a stone burnisher (SF13).

Erosion Scar C

This eroding scar measured approximately 1.5 × 1.5m and is situated down-slope from scar B, forming the eastern side of scar D. Again, bedrock outcropped towards the base of this feature and many tumbled blocks and slabs of gneiss were present throughout. Two large slabs to the south end could possibly have been structural and related to scar D (see below and illus 26).

The uppermost soils here were very similar to those in erosion scar A and the top of scar B, although lacking pottery. A further context of fine, light-brown silty loam with no finds or inclusions was visible towards the bottom 0.5m of the section.

Erosion Scar D

This was the most distinct structural element encountered on the survey. A drystone wall of at least four courses, and measuring *c* 0.5m long, ran parallel with the contours of the stack for 4m, on the landward face (illus 28).

The size of the wall stones was in general more substantial than those in the other walls found on the stack, measuring *c* 400 × 200mm on average. Two larger blocks, each *c* 400 × 400mm, lay at either end of this wall, although it is not thought that these were terminals. To the south, the wall disappeared under vegetation and to the north it had probably fallen away, leaving the exposed soil layers in scar C. The soil matrix around the stones was very similar to that of scar C, with a ground stone tool (SF11), and fire-cracked stones found in the upper layers. A dark-brown organic-rich loam, with charcoal flecks throughout, was recorded below those already described.

Erosion Scar E

This scar contained four courses of dressed drystone wall covering an area *c* 1m long by 0.5m high, resting on bedrock. It may have originally continued to the north but has since collapsed. This section was only

Illus 29 The level summit of Dunasbroc from the east

1m lower than scar D, and could have been related to the wall there, although the blocks were smaller here, being 200 × 100mm in size. The surrounding soil deposits were very similar to the lower deposit in scar D, above.

Area F (illus 25)
This refers to the *c* 3m-wide ramp that formed the present access route to the site, just above the traverse. It was not clear whether this ramp would have been present in antiquity, and it may have been an outcome of the slumping and erosion of whatever structures were originally present. Again occupation debris such as animal bone, shell and charcoal flecks could be seen within soils very similar to those uppermost in scar A. Stone tools were also retrieved from the surface here (SF4, illus 29).

Erosion Scar G (illus 25)
A small drystone wall, three courses high, covering an area *c* 1.2m long by 0.5m high was constructed of stone slabs measuring *c* 400 × 150mm. It was surrounded above, below and to the sides by bedrock outcrops.

Area H
This was the flat area on the top of the stack (illus 26). Measuring roughly 15 × 6m, the platform was formed of bedrock except on its eastern edge, where vegetation and soils, the latter probably anthropogenic, were noted (see Part III, Section 18).

Erosion Scar I
Another short length of drystone walling consisted of at least three visible courses of stone slabs measuring *c* 400 × 150mm. This wall was not very well constructed, with running vertical joints and badly fitting slabs. Like the walling in section G, it was built into a fissure between bedrock outcrops, and did not appear to be structural.

Artefacts
A total of 48 pottery sherds, five of which were decorated, and five stone tools were collected during the survey of this site. In addition,

samples of butchered bone and charcoal were also retrieved.

Two large, decorated body sherds and one rim sherd (all joining) were recovered from section A. The pottery is part of a Neolithic assemblage from the site (see Appendix 3, MacSween, below), and has marked similarities with the sherd found at Luchruban (see Section 11).

9.6 Discussion

The evidence suggests (see Section 9.2 above) that the landward side of Dunasbroc is relatively stable at present, and may not have suffered active erosion for some time, but it is difficult to assess the degree of change to the access to the site. It is unclear whether there might have been a land bridge present at the time of its earliest use or not. However, the presence of walling on the landward descending edge of the stack suggests that it was, in the past as now, detached from the mainland to a greater or lesser degree.

These small sections of drystone walling (described above in Section 9.5) seem to have been constructed with relatively small, often rounded stones and built with no defensive function. They have a close association with the outcropping bedrock and may have been built for less prosaic, even cosmetic, reasons – in order to blur the distinction between the natural stack and the structure. It is clear that they could not have formed part of a massive defensive structure such as a broch or dun.

Charcoal is present in almost every eroding context on this site, as are shell and bone (including butchered bone). The large number of artefacts recovered indicates that there was extensive activity on this site. This site was examined in more detail by trial excavation, the results of which are described in Part III and Appendix 2 (Matrices), with further discussion in the concluding sections of this report.