
14 DUN OTHAIL

14.1 Physical description and location (*illus 47*)

Dun Othail (NGR: NB 5420 5144, NMRS no. NB55SW 01, SAM5455) is situated on the east side of Lewis and is a striking pinnacle of rock with a vertical cliff face on its landward side. The base of this pinnacle can be accessed by traversing a steep path from the south, which runs north-east to a promontory below the pinnacle. On the seaward side of this promontory at least five structures sit on a series of small terraces, and are protected by a defensive wall.

The site is within an area of high cliffs of basement Lewisian gneiss and is considered to be eroding but stable (Burgess & Church 1997, 307).

14.2 Access

Access to the main terrace on Dun Othail was via a straightforward but steep descent and traverse, with no need for ropes. However, ropes and climbing techniques were required to explore further small terraces and the top of the pinnacle itself.

14.3 Previous work

The first brief mention of the site as ‘Dun-owle’, a natural fort, was by Martin Martin in 1696. The next reference is from the Ordnance Survey:

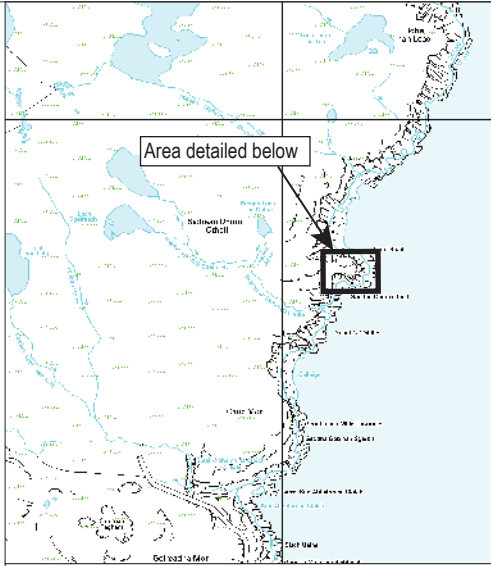
A large and prominent rock almost perpendicular. Its top is covered with a thin surface that produces scanty grass through which portions of rock appear. At the SE base of this rock above the level of the sea are the ruins of a house said to have been erected and inhabited by an outlaw . . . (Ordnance Survey Name Book, 1852)

T S Muir described the site in 1861 as ‘an architectural remain – of an early chapel, probably’ (Muir 1861, 168; MacLeod 1997, 37). It is not known where Muir got this information from, but it differs from the earlier description by the Ordnance Survey.

MacGibbon and Ross continued Muir’s assertion that the building was a chapel when they included the site in their gazetteer of ecclesiastical sites (MacGibbon & Ross 1896–7), and Captain Thomas also mentioned this reference (Thomas 1890). He



Illus 47 Dun Othail from the south



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	Cliff edge	KEY
	Archaeological structure	
	Archaeological structure, heavily overgrown	



recounted notes taken by the Rev. MacPhail from his visit in the 1860s, 'although there is no defensive masonry upon the rock a single person could defend the path. An oblong ruin upon its extreme point is supposed to have been a chapel' (cited in Robson 2004, 22).

MacPhail's notes on the site are quoted at length by Robson (2004, 21–23), and these also refer to two local traditions associated with the site. The first account describes how 'Oighre MhicLeod' (Heir of the MacLeod or Torquil Heir, the son of MacLeod) was imprisoned at Dun Othail by a MacNicol, in revenge for serious injuries inflicted on him by MacLeod. The tale is also described at length elsewhere (MacDonald 1967, 241; MacGregor 1933, 207; Thomas 1890, 371), but suffice it to say that the MacNicol jumped off the top of Dun Othail with the heir, and they were both dashed on the rocks below. The gorge and dun were henceforth called 'MacNicol's Leap'.

The second tradition recounted a prophecy by the Coinneach Othair (the Brahan Seer), who foretold that the whole of Lewis would be depopulated by the sword, but that 'there shall come out of Dun Othail one who will render them aid' (MacGregor 1933, 206; Robson 2004, 22). The site was also linked to the Morrison clan and a further tradition which stated that Alan Morrison, famous for his daring leap across the chasm at Dun Eistean, was buried in a small hollow above Dun Othail with his two brothers (MacGregor 1933, 211).

In 1928 the RCAHMS failed to note any buildings on the dun, although in 1969 the Ordnance Survey located the so-called chapel building and described it as orientated NNE/SSW, defined by turf-covered footings *c* 0.5m high, and measuring 5 × 3m internally. It had an entrance near the north end of the south-east wall but the Ordnance Survey stated, 'There is nothing to support its classification as a chapel' (Ordnance Survey 1969).

14.4 The survey (illus 48)

The dun did not have any structures on its summit, but there were a series of structures on the lower grassy slopes to the east or seaward side of the site. The turf-covered footings of a perimeter wall enclosed a series of terraces over an area of approximately 20 × 20m on the lowest slopes of the eastern part of the dun. The area within the perimeter wall was also enclosed to the north, east and south by steep cliffs to the sea, and by a steep, grass-covered hill sloping upwards to the summit of Dun Othail to the west.

The approach to this enclosure was via a series of terraces on the south side to a narrow ledge. The ledge, *c* 2m wide and 10m long, created a strong natural fortification, which only a few people could pass at a

time. This opened onto the lowest and largest terrace. A natural path wound upwards between rock outcrops to a middle terrace, and then continued uphill to a third terrace, all of which had structures upon them. The summit plateau was gained and surveyed, but it contained no structural features (illus 49). A deep-water inlet immediately below the lower terrace could possibly have been a landing place.

Structure A

Structure A (illus 50) on the middle terrace was referred to as a chapel in many previous descriptions of the site. It measured 5 × 3m internally, with walls flattened and collapsed, measuring a maximum of *c* 0.5m high, and 1m in width. Visible stone walling formed the internal face of the building, surviving up to two courses high at the north corner. There was no visible external face. A narrow entrance, 0.75m wide, perforated the north end of the east wall, and was flanked by large square boulders. Rock outcrops sheltered the west and south sides of the building.

Structure B

The only other structure on this terrace was a revetted wall visible to the north. The revetting contained soils above a narrow path, which was cut into the steep slope at the base of the dun. The path led to the highest terrace and another rectangular building.

Structure C

Structure C (illus 51), lay in the lee of a rock outcrop, on the lower terrace, and was sub-rectangular, measuring 6 × 3m externally. There were only three walls; the side wall to the north was formed by the rock outcrop. The west wall did not abut the rock face, but created a gap that may have been the entrance. The walls were at most 0.4m high, and no more than 0.75m in width, and were turf-covered.

Structure D

Structure D was a sub-rectangular building, measuring 3 × 2m externally, with no visible entrance. Its turf-covered walls were at most 0.4m high and no more than 1m in width. It was adjacent to, but not connected with, Structure E.

Structure E

Structure E was also sub-rectangular and measured 4 × 2m externally. It may have had an entrance in the eastern wall, and appeared to have been built into the perimeter wall of Structures F and G. The remains of its walls were *c* 0.4m high and 0.75m wide. It was separated by only 1m from Structure D.

Structure F

The turf-covered footings of the perimeter wall enclosed the terraces on the lowest slopes of the eastern part of the site. The wall was in two



Illus 49 Accessing summit of Dun Othail from the south-east

parts, Structure F and Structure G, divided by an entrance. Structure F ran along the eastern cliff top that skirted the terrace. The wall was revetted, to bring it up to the same level as the plateau, and to support it where the cliff had no well-defined edge. It enclosed the lowest and largest terrace. Two small fragments of undiagnostic pottery were recovered from amongst the revetting stones outcrops.

Structure G

This part of the perimeter wall abutted a near-vertical cliff face at its western end, and an entrance was positioned about 2m to the east of this. The wall to the west of the entrance was Structure G (illus 52). It was up to 1.5m thick. The break between the two parts of the wall appeared to have been enlarged by erosion in recent years.



Illus 50 Structure A, Dun Othail from the west. Scale 1.2m long.



Illus 51 Structure C, Dun Othail from the north. Scale 1.2m long.



Illus 52 Structures F and G, Dun Othail from the south-west. Scale 1.2m long.

Structure H

Structure H was the remains of a wall roughly 0.4m wide, which could be discerned tracing most of the edge of a small, higher terrace, c 15 × 5m large, some 20–30m above the main terraces.

Structure I

A natural access ramp led to the top of the outcrop behind Structure C, and to the middle terrace. The low remains of another semi-circular wall abutted a rock outcrop at the western edge of this terrace, in a similar way to Structure C, but without any visible gap for an entrance. Structure I measured 7 × 3m, with walls c 0.5m wide and c 0.3m high.

14.5 Discussion

Only the Ordnance Survey surveyors of 1852 noted the presence of ‘3 ruins, one above the other at different levels’ on the lower terraces of Dun Othail. The other writers were possibly preoccupied by the apparent existence of a chapel (Structure A) since its description by Muir in the 1860s. Malcolm MacPhail mentioned the access path, defensive

wall and chapel, but there was no mention of the other buildings, despite his almost certainly having visited the site and usually being detailed in his note-taking.

The Ordnance Survey, in 1969, located the ‘chapel’ and confirmed the description given by Muir (later reiterated by MacGibbon & Ross); but they did not identify the other buildings on this occasion.

The possibility of there having been a chapel on the site stems from a misidentification by Muir in the 1860s of Structure A. This affected subsequent descriptions of the remains despite the accuracy of the original description taken by the Ordnance Survey ten years earlier, which referred to the main structure as having been built by an outlaw. This description would have been taken from a local informant and had strong associations with the various local traditions that linked the site to clan histories. The physical remains today would fit this interpretation, when compared with the form of buildings on known clan sites such as Dun Eistean. Dun Othail would be easily defended from the land and the sea, and affords excellent views of the Minch. However, it is impossible to interpret the site further from these traditions alone.