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## 20 INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

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### 20.1 Site morphology

The morphology of the site, and its relationship to the coastline, is likely to have changed over the years. Sea level rise, estimated at perhaps 6m (Section 3.3 above) has affected the coastline and direct wind and wave action may well have changed the shape of the stack itself. Archaeological deposits and walls survive at the top of the stack at 18.2m OD, down to 11m OD on its landward side. The morphology of this part of the stack may not have changed significantly since the walls were constructed. We still do not know, however, whether these walls were built in the Neolithic or Iron Age.

Cliff erosion and sediment movement have produced deposits of large, rounded boulders in the adjacent geos and between the stack and the adjacent mainland. The depth of these deposits is unknown, and it is therefore possible that even when the sea levels were lower, the stack may have been free-standing.

Taking these factors into account, it seems most probable that during the Neolithic period Dunasbroc was a small, well-defined coastal hillock, at least 7m high, very close to the edge of steep c 17m high sea-cliffs. The geos at each side and the gap between it and the mainland may have been present to some extent, although it is difficult to know to what degree. Dunasbroc would still have been a dramatic coastal site.

### 20.2 Neolithic use of the site

There is unambiguous evidence from the two small excavated areas on the stack for intensive Neolithic use of the site. The volume of ceramics (477 sherds of Neolithic or probably Neolithic pottery) and lithics fits with the wider pattern of finds-rich Hebridean Neolithic sites (eg Armit 1987, Branigan & Foster 1995), although no geographically similar site has previously been excavated.

Of the structures and deposits excavated, only one feature can be strongly argued to have survived from the Neolithic use of the site. This is the truncated posthole 023, filled with deposit 015 (illus 64), which cut the natural subsoil. The radiocarbon date of  $4570 \pm 35$  BP (SUERC 13556/GU 15122) from birch charcoal from this context suggests a Neolithic date that was not contradicted by any stratigraphic relationship. Its small size (diameter c 100mm) makes it unlikely to have been part of any sort of substantial structure or habitation, although it would also seem to have been too small for a free-standing post, unless it was severely truncated.

It is also worth considering the possibility that the lowest of the deposits on the top of the stack, identified in the soil micromorphology report (Appendix 8) as the lower part of Context 005, might belong to this period. The report indicated that a distinct context, formed of three dumps of redeposited natural subsoil and weathered gneiss (2b, c and d in Appendix 8), underlay a truncation horizon, and had been influenced by heat from above. This was interpreted as a construction deposit, levelling the natural platform on the top of the stack for use. There were no finds and no radiocarbon dates from this deposit, and no anthropogenic materials were identified within it under microscopic examination. However, it was, stratigraphically, the earliest context excavated.

There is no stratigraphic reason why the walls within the excavated area (025, 026, 027) could not have been Neolithic in their original construction, though there was evidence (see below) for modification or rebuilding during the Iron Age use of the site. Their age remains unclear because all of the excavated contexts, which post-dated but were associated with the walls, could be clearly Iron Age in date (see below).

The lack of solely Neolithic deposits also means that it is very difficult to discuss the nature and duration of the use of the site at that time. All the Neolithic radiocarbon dates came from wood charcoal, willow or birch, of which there were large quantities in most deposits. There was therefore clearly at least one significant burning episode in the Neolithic. However, though a little of the pottery showed sooting or charred residues (eg SF111, SF146) no secondary burning was recorded on the pottery, nor on the leaf-shaped arrowhead and many other lithics. Although fire was used at the site, the burning had not affected all the objects that were presumably present on the site at the time.

It is not possible to say whether the burnt and unburnt animal bone from the site may have included Neolithic material, as there are no dates from the bone finds, which all came from deposits with both Neolithic and Iron Age evidence. Unfortunately, the situation is the same with all of the walls and flues/drains, which although stratigraphically earlier than some deposits cannot be shown to belong to either period without further investigation.

The Neolithic date range from the radiocarbon samples stretches from  $4815 \pm 35$  BP (SUERC 13555/GU 15121) to  $4570 \pm 35$  BP (SUERC 13556/GU 15122), ie from 3660 cal BC to 3100 cal BC (at 2-sigma level of confidence; see table 3), a maximum range of 560 years. Although it is, of course, impossible to say what evidence may have been lost from

the site in the Iron Age reworking of the material (see below) it does suggest a relatively short period of use of the site during the Neolithic period.

### 20.3 Iron Age use of the site

In contrast to the Neolithic assemblage, the Iron Age deposits yielded only a small number of diagnostic Iron Age finds. Three Iron Age sherds are described in the pottery report (Appendix 3 – SF111, SF160 and SF175), though some of the undiagnostic body sherds could probably be either Iron Age or Neolithic. There were no diagnostic Iron Age lithics, though again, it is possible that some of the less diagnostic quartz could potentially have dated to this period.

Despite the dearth of artefactual evidence, most deposits are stratigraphically Iron Age in date. Context 005, underlying the majority of the excavated contexts, and overlying natural subsoil, provided an Iron Age date from an indeterminate cereal grain ( $2125 \pm 35$  BP, SUERC 13550/GU 15119; see table 3). This date came from near the top of the deposit (see above, Trench 1), and soil micromorphological analysis (Appendix 8) indicated that much of the context was clean of anthropogenic content. As discussed above, the lower part of the context (2b, c and d in Appendix 8) consisted of dumps of redeposited natural soil and weathered gneiss, very similar to the subsoil. These slanting dumps were horizontally truncated, and overlain by a weathered deposit of similar material imported from elsewhere, which formed the upper part of Context 005. It was this upper part of the deposit that contained the finds and some charred organic remains, yielding the Iron Age date. The lower part of this deposit could therefore potentially have been laid down in the Neolithic, but given the lack of evidence we can only say that these deposits were deposited no later than the Iron Age (an Iron Age *terminus ante quem*).

The stratigraphic relationship between Context 005 and wall 025 is not resolved, and the date of the construction of wall 025, and whether it was modified afterwards, is therefore similarly undecided. This also follows for the other walls, 026 and 027. As before, this uncertainty means that the most accurate dating we can ascribe to these features is a *terminus ante quem* of AD0–200, or Middle Iron Age.

Wall 025 was insubstantial, and quite unlike the base of a structural wall. There seemed to have been a natural gully in the stack on the landward side, which was bridged by wall 025 and wall 026, so that traces of it only reappeared lower down the stack beneath 026. Linear feature 011/012 was built into this gully, and its end was integrated into wall 025. The stratigraphic relationships of feature 011/012, which was above Context 021, make it possible that it was Iron Age in date. The fill of this feature (Context 012) was the only deposit on site not to contain burnt artefacts or burnt bone, though the

ubiquitous charcoal was present, suggesting less direct fire influence on the contents of 011 than on the other deposits on the site.

Given that the amount of evidence reviewed so far points to large-scale burning, the possibility that this feature was a flue must be considered. Its position seemed ideal for such a function, taking air from outwith and underneath the plateau and feeding it straight into the centre, which would also presumably have been the centre of the fire. The apparent double level construction of the feature, visible in wall 025, was of unknown function. Perhaps the lower void transported air further into the plateau than the excavated one. It is also possible that the feature was a drain, ensuring the plateau could not become waterlogged. This, however, seems less likely, as the site is not prone to flooding, and this does not help to explain the double level of the feature. Neither was there much to indicate the purpose of a further built void in the wall just 400mm beneath and a little to the north (illus 62), which had an intact lintel and supports. Perhaps these features also performed either or both of the above functions.

A void in wall 026, similar to the features described in wall 025, was present close to the base of wall 026. The void was *c* 100 × 200mm in dimension and had a lintel stone held up by two lateral supports. Given the distance from the plateau *c* 3.5m, or 2m vertically, this feature seems less likely to have been a flue, and could perhaps be more sensibly interpreted as a drain. Certainly the horizontal ledge formed by wall 026 would tend to gather water, which could damage the wall.

Wall 026 appeared to be a retaining wall, creating a 2m-wide platform spiralling anti-clockwise up and around the stack, interpreted in the field as an access route to the plateau. This may not necessarily have been the case. The Coastal Erosion Assessment, Lewis describes Dunasbroc as a 'stack enclosed by a wall' (Burgess & Church 1997, 267), with wall 026 the only candidate which would have been visible enough for this. The wall was reasonably substantial, and could possibly have been taller, and used either defensively or as an enclosure, with its extra stonework having since been lost to the sea. If this was the case, it seems strange that the wall was not horizontal, and also that it did not continue around the south-west side of the stack. It may be that the prevailing south-westerly storms have destroyed the southern section of the wall and caused the remainder to slip, but there was no evidence for this.

If wall 026 was a platform forming an access track to the plateau, its lower termination would have been at the south-eastern corner, where access was easiest in modern times. A small ledge climbs to this point from the head of the neck of rock that joins the stack to the mainland, and could easily have met with the terrace formed by wall 026. Although, as noted above, we cannot be sure what shape this lower part of the stack took in antiquity, this seems the most likely interpretation.

The excavated deposits that lay between walls 025 and 026 supported the interpretation of this area as having a different function from the top of the stack. Contexts 008, 013 and 022 contained large amounts of rubble, surrounded by a soil matrix, which seemed to have come from the walls. The presence in Context 008, the uppermost, of the characteristic suite of artefacts and ecofacts found in the deposits on the top of the stack, burnt and unburnt bone, lithics, Iron Age and Neolithic ceramics, raised the possibility that this deposit, which accumulated during the Iron Age, did so in between walls which were already to a greater or lesser degree dilapidated.

Wall 027 seemed clearly functional, providing support for wall 026 on the 50–70°-angled slope. It was very well made even if slight, and did not appear to have slipped significantly. It was clearly built before the larger wall 026, as it lay beneath it, and formed a foundation for the later wall.

The other deposits on top of the stack, which clearly post-dated both linear feature 011/012, and wall 025, and overlay Context 005, were all Iron Age in date. The earliest of these was Context 014, which with Context 024 was compact, and had a few burnt finds. This may represent a resurfacing

of the plateau, later than the resurfacing demonstrated in Context 005. The deposits which overlay it, Contexts 004, 018 and 002, all with a mixture of burnt and unburnt finds, would seem to correspond to Contexts 003, 006 and 009 in Trench 2. They seem to have been the result of clearing back the surface of the stack, and mixing burnt and unburnt material in the process. Interestingly, the residual Neolithic finds, particularly the ceramics, do not show any significant wear on their edges, which suggests that the distance that they were moved, and the amount of disturbance caused by the move of the Neolithic deposits, was small. The contexts in Trench 2 were revetted by the slight accumulation of stones 010, showing a concern to retain material on the top of the stack, possibly to maintain the upper surface of the plateau, but perhaps also from a concern for the material itself.

All the Iron Age dates from the site came from cereal grains, in contrast to the Neolithic dates (see [table 3](#)), which were from charcoal. The date range was even tighter than that for the Neolithic, from 210 cal BC (SUERC 13550/GU15119) to 50 cal AD (SUERC 13549/GU 15118; at 2-sigma level of confidence), less than 300 years.