
17 GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Eleven examples of a little-studied and vulnerable class of site have been surveyed and the results presented. These surveys build upon the large body of information collated by Burgess and Church in the Coastal Erosion Assessment, Lewis (Burgess & Church 1997).

The surveys have highlighted a number of academic and practical issues crucial to our understanding and management of the monuments. Of first importance is the fact that, with care and even limited resources, such sites can be safely accessed, and can therefore be subject to more detailed research. Both survey and excavation on such sites are practical propositions, and there is therefore little excuse for the neglect of them as a class of monument.

Revisiting the Lewis Coastal Erosion Assessment has also demonstrated that, although these monuments are located on the interface between land and sea, and are therefore, as a class, particularly vulnerable to erosion, it cannot be assumed that they are all actively eroding. Nor can assumptions be made about which aspects or areas of even the eroding sites are most at risk. Each monument must be subject to individual assessment and monitoring in order to determine which aspects, if any, of its archaeology are under threat or in the process of destruction. Caisteal a' Mhorair, for example, appears to be stable and retains its original ground plan.

Academically, however, even a project on such a limited scale as this one has revealed the limitations of our understanding of stack and coastal promontory sites. The past assumption that they are largely Iron Age in date (Branigan & Foster 2002, 86, and the previous understanding after Lamb 1980, 1973) should now be abandoned. There is clear evidence of Neolithic presence and use at Dunasbroc (see Part III and Section 9), Stac Domhnuill Chaim (Section 6) and Eilean nan Luchruban (Section 11). In contrast, excavations at Dun Eistean have shown that site to be wholly medieval and late medieval in date (Barrowman, R C 2007; Barrowman, R C et al 2007), with none of the underlying Iron Age use

initially expected (Barrowman, C S 2000, 20–1). Dun Arnistean (Section 10) has produced evidence of Iron Age occupation, as has Dunasbroc (see Part III below), yet neither site appears to have monumental Middle Iron Age buildings. Stac a' Chaisteal (Section 7), in contrast, does have a monumental building, and this is the first time that the existence of an Iron Age blockhouse of the Shetland type (Lamb 1980), suggested previously by Burgess (1999), has been confirmed in the Western Isles. It is possible from the ceramic evidence that there might even have been Norse period use of Dun Arnistean (Lane 1995, 5). As yet we do not have evidence for Bronze Age use of these promontory and stack sites, but perhaps we should expect such evidence to emerge in the future.

As changing and shifting geological sites, stacks and promontories can effectively be treated as a group. Their liminal position between land and sea must always have been attractive, and may well have influenced their archaeological functions. Many of the sites, for example Stac a' Chaisteal, Stac Domhnuill Chaim, Dun Eistean, Caisteal a' Mhorair, seem also to have been located on the fringes of cultivatable land, on or near boundaries between townships, liminal zones in more ways than one. Some of these sites seem likely, both from their structural and traditional evidence, to have functioned as Medieval or Early Modern lookout posts and refuges, whether for outlaws (such as Stac Domhnuill Chaim) or for clan authorities (such as Dun Eistean). However, we cannot assume that their earlier use, where present, was of the same nature; the excavations at Dunasbroc have demonstrated a rather less straightforward sequence of events (see below for further discussion).

Further surveys around the Atlantic edge and targeted excavation of selected sites are required to approach a full understanding of the archaeology of stack, island and promontory locations, and the motivations that lay behind successive occupations. There is some degree of urgency if this goal is to be achieved before some of these sites are lost to erosion in the next few decades.