



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

DUN STRUAN BEAG (DUN BEAG BROCH)



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Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Historic Environment Scotland
Longmore House
Salisbury Place
Edinburgh
EH9 1SH

+44 (0) 131 668 8600
www.historicenvironment.scot

You can download this publication from our website at
www.historicenvironment.scot

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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

DUN STRUAN BEAG

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I. SUMMARY

1.1 Introduction

The drystone remains of Dun Beag¹ broch are prominently sited on a rocky knoll overlooking Loch Bracadale, near the village of Struan, west Skye.

The Iron Age site has been excavated, and displays the circular plan typical of brochs, with a gallery in the thickness of the wall-base, as well as the lower part of a stairway. Its walls stand to about 1.8 metres in height, with an entrance from the south-east.

Dun Beag was taken into State care in 1980.

The site is unstaffed and accessed from a car park downslope. The short walk to the site is uphill over rough pasture. There are information boards in the car park and at the broch itself.

Visitor numbers are not currently counted, but were estimated at 1,220 for 2018-2019.

1.2 Statement of Significance

Brochs are an Iron Age phenomenon; they were first constructed (on current evidence) at a date between 400 and 200 BC and are a prehistoric building type unique to Scotland. They are typified by a circular internal ground plan with massive drystone walls capable of rising to tower-like heights.² The largest among them are believed to have been the tallest prehistoric stone structures in North Western Europe, though very few have survived to any great height.

Dun Beag is of national importance as a good example of a broch, with features characteristic of brochs found near the western seaboard. The excavated material suggests that Dun Beag was probably occupied within the period 200 BC to AD 100, which accords well with other brochs from which dates are available.

¹ Alternative spelling: Dùn Beag. The name signifies 'Little Fort' – see OS Name Books, Inverness-shire (1876-1878), Inverness county (Skye) Volume 8, Parishes of Portree, Bracadale, Duirinish and Snizort, OS1/16/8, 66. Accessible at: [Scotland's People. Ordnance Survey Name Books \(scotlandspeople.co.uk\)](https://scotlandspeople.co.uk) (accessed: 09 October 2025).

² For more background information on brochs and broch studies, see Appendix 3.

Key aspects of Dun Beag's significance include:

- Its survival as one of the best preserved brochs on Skye. Most other brochs survive as tumbled masses of stone, but because Dun Beag is maintained and presented in its excavated state, visitors can appreciate many of the architectural features which typify west-coast brochs.
- What the choice of site says about the occupants. The location of Dun Beag, on a rocky knoll with extensive views over the surrounding landscape, suggests that the builders were combining the practicalities of finding a dry location which had a ready source of raw materials, with a desire to ensure that those in the structure could observe a wide area and also be seen from a distance.
- The importance of the excavated material remains. The artefacts recovered during excavation indicate something of the activities carried out at the site (metalworking, cooking, processing grain) and include some personal items (pins, glass beads). They also hint at intermittent occupation and / or use of the site extending beyond the Iron Age into the Viking, Medieval and post-Medieval periods.
- The relationship of the broch with other sites and features both in the immediate area (field boundaries, fort, hut circles) and with other types of Iron Age structures on the west coast of Scotland. It is likely that further archaeological deposits survive, including midden material and further structural remains around the broch, which could potentially add to our understanding of the site in its immediate context.
- The association of the site with Countess Vincent Baillet de Latour, née Johanna von Ettingshausen. The Countess was one of Scotland's early female archaeologists and her work on the Skye brochs of Dun Fiadhairdt and Dun Beag are significant events in the history of archaeology in Scotland.

The following pages give a fuller background to the site and go on to discuss the various aspects of its significance. A range of Appendices includes an overview of 'Brochs – theories and interpretations' at Appendix 3.

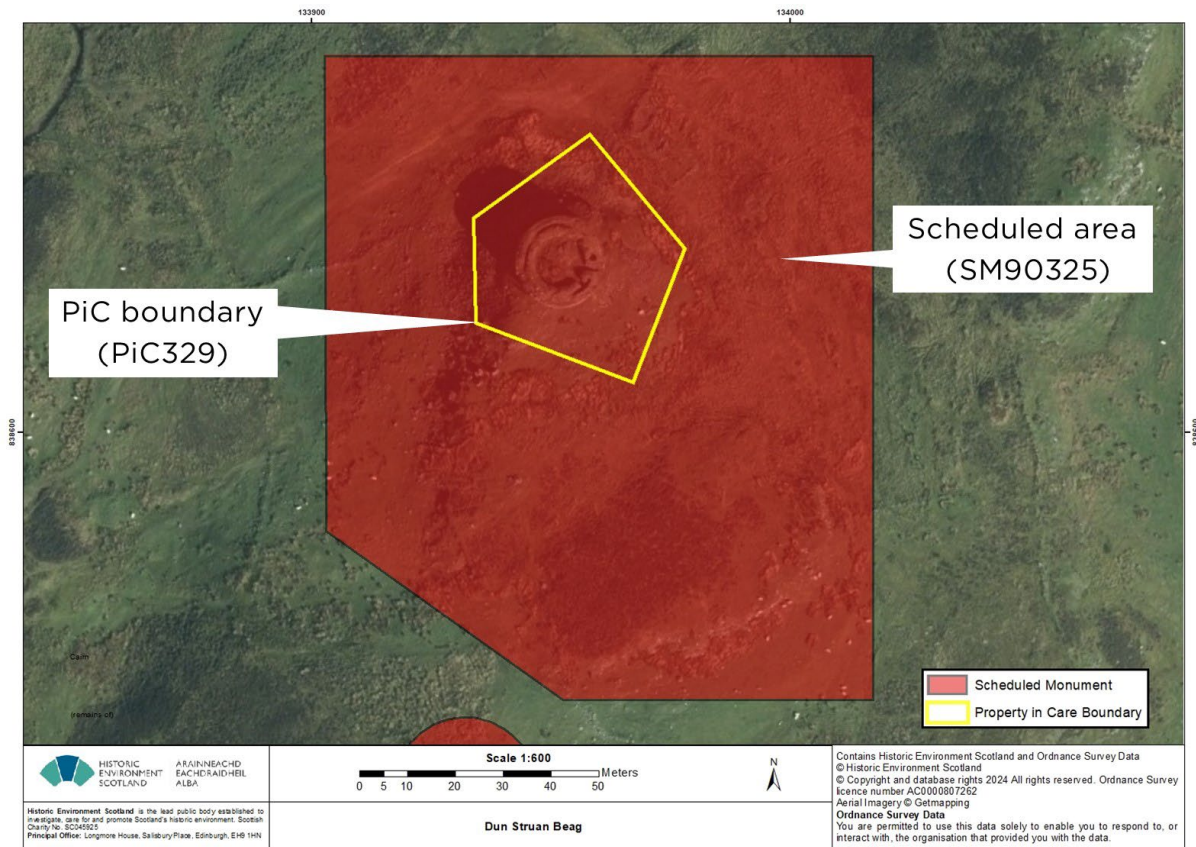


Figure 1: Dun Beag scheduled area (SM90325) and PiC boundary (PiC329), for illustrative purposes only. For further images, see Appendix 2.

2. ASSESSMENT OF VALUES

2.1 Background

2.1.1 Introduction – brochs

Brochs have been the subject of much study and attempts to understand them have given rise to numerous theories about their genesis, purpose, context and relationships to other Iron Age structures. The best-preserved examples are striking and distinctive sights.

Broch towers are characterised by their conformity to certain design elements which make them seem a very cohesive group (near-circular ground plan, hollow or galleried wall construction, a single narrow entrance passage, a staircase within the wall thickness, stacked voids and tower form). Dating evidence is scarce and most reliable dates relate to periods of occupation rather than construction.

However, recent radiocarbon dates from sites in South Uist and Shetland (sampled within walls or beneath the structure) indicate construction

before 100 BC and between 200 and 400 BC respectively.³ It is generally thought that the small number of brochs in the Scottish Lowlands and Southern Uplands are late examples, and some, at least, seem to have been built in the second century AD.

Brochs are acknowledged as one of the only building types unique to Scotland; their remains occur most frequently in the north and west, and rarely in the south. As it is not known how many brochs were built, much depends upon survival rates and upon adequate investigation. Estimates for potential broch sites range from 150 – 600 sites; however, most have not been investigated and criteria for assessing the sites vary. It is generally agreed that about 80 known sites meet the definition for broch used here, though there may be many more which might yet be proven, if sufficiently investigated.

There are many competing theories as to the social context which gave rise to brochs, and their use and meanings for Iron Age society. As yet there are no agreed conclusions, and a fuller account of these themes is given at Appendix 3.

2.1.2 Descriptive overview

Dun Beag broch is prominently located on a rocky knoll on moorland above Loch Bracadale on the west coast of Skye, at about 60 metres above sea level.

The broch is of ground-galleried construction and its diameter measures around 18.6 metres externally and around 10.7 metres internally.⁴ The walls survive to around 1.2 metres high internally, but the amount of collapsed stone lying around the base of the knoll, and the descriptions of early travellers, indicate that the structure was considerably higher when built.

The structure is entered through a now roofless entrance passage where the thickness of the broch walls is apparent. The passage leads into a circular courtyard with an uneven surface formed of the bedrock. There are three further doorways leading off the courtyard. Going in a clockwise direction from the passage, the first entrance leads to an intramural cell to the left and an intramural staircase to the right. Opposite the main entrance is a doorway leading into the gallery and just to the right of the passage is an entrance into a small circular cell.

2.1.3 Antiquarian interest and early descriptions

The site has been a focus for tourists since the eighteenth century. Thomas Pennant's *A Tour in Scotland; 1769* includes an engraving of the broch which is portrayed as ruinous with vegetation growing in the interior,⁵ while the text describes the structure as having walls 18 feet (c. six metres)

³ Parker Pearson and Sharples 1999, 355; Dockrill et al 2015, 59-60.

⁴ Mackie 2007.

⁵ Image included in Appendix 2.

high.⁶ The following year the site was visited by Dr Samuel Johnson and James Boswell. Johnson's description records the wall height as nine feet (2.75 metres).⁷ The figure given by Pennant, however, seems to accord better with the proportions of the broch in the engraving included in his volume. Their description indicates that the landowners, the Macleods of Macleod, had little interest in preserving the broch as it was in 'ruinous condition', preferring to invest in Dunvegan Castle instead.⁸

2.1.4 Excavations

Excavations were carried out at Dun Beag between 1914 and 1920 by Countess Vincent Baillet de Latour, who was one of the early female Fellows of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, being elected in 1915.⁹ The excavations were written up by J. Graham Callander, Director of the National Museum in Edinburgh, and published in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1921.¹⁰

The purpose of the Countess's excavations was to expose the floor plan of the broch and also to determine whether it would be possible to identify floor levels relating to different periods of occupation. Around two hundred tons of stone and earth were removed from the broch,¹¹ with all the soil "sifted through the fingers".¹² Callander reports that Pennant describes "the vestiges of five apartments, one in the centre, four around...the entrance six feet high, covered with great stones", which must have been secondary structures as the structure was full of stones at the time of the excavation.¹³ Callander was told by a local resident about the removal of masonry in the mid-nineteenth century, including lintels which were at that time still in position above the entrance passage.¹⁴

As the broch interior was emptied, no structures were identified apart from a stretch of wall c.1m high in the north sector, a network of drains at various levels, and slab paving on the southern half of the courtyard. Layers of red peat ash, artefacts, bones and shells were attributed to the lowest level, some under the stone paving. The gallery was described as being full of soil, with animal bones throughout.¹⁵

⁶ Pennant 1774.

⁷ Johnson 1775, 83.

⁸ Although Norman MacLeod of MacLeod (1754–1801) amassed a significant fortune in service in the British Empire, he appears to have lost much of it before returning to Dunvegan in 1789. For further detail see [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c.1600–1997](#)

⁹ *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 1915, vol LXIX, xx.

¹⁰ Callander 1921.

¹¹ This equates to deposits only 0.87m deep, which seems improbably shallow. Perhaps the figure discounts the stony portion of the infill.

¹² Callander 1921, 110.

¹³ Callander 1921, 118.

¹⁴ Callander 1921, 110.

¹⁵ Callander 1921, 116–117.

2.1.5 Surveys

Dun Beag was surveyed in 1921 as part of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland's survey of Skye and the Western Isles which was begun in 1914, completed in 1925 and published in 1928. A description, photographs, plan and section of the site are included.¹⁶ At this time, single lintels were in place over the entrance to the gallery leading to the stair-foot cell and over the foot of the stair: these have since been removed.

A survey of Dun Beag and its immediate surroundings was commissioned in 1999 by Historic Scotland and carried out by Roger Miket and Martin Wildgoose.¹⁷ The survey recorded at least seven separate quarries around the broch. The smaller quarries (of a few metres across) were generally confined to the east and west flanks of the plateau. The largest quarry extends for a distance of just over 50 metres, along the southern edge of the plateau and indicates the removal of a significant quantity of stone. There are a number of unused blocks of stone adjacent to this quarry and a skirt of debris and waste which fans out from the cutting. A number of field walls and various structures including several turf structures were also recorded. Given the availability, until the early 20th century, of readily available stone from the ruins of the broch, these quarries seem most likely to be of prehistoric date and may represent the sources of building stone for the broch itself.

2.1.6 Collection

The collection of artefacts from the Countess's excavations is held in the National Museums of Scotland.¹⁸ Iron Age material includes: pottery (some decorated); stone objects including hammer-stones, querns, moulds for casting ingots, whetstones, and a handled steatite cup or lamp; copper alloy rings and pins, iron implements, including a knife and a spearhead; a bone awl; glass beads and a glass armlet fragment.¹⁹

Other finds, including a gold finger ring, are probably Viking age in date.²⁰ Bronze pins, a belt buckle and a coin of Henry II (1154-89) represent the use of, or visits to, the broch in later centuries.

2.1.7 Conservation works

The conservation of the broch Since it was taken into State care in 1980 has essentially been confined to the reinstatement of fallen stones, turf

¹⁶ RCAHMS 1928, site number 479.

¹⁷ Miket 1999.

¹⁸ The catalogue can be searched at: [National Museums Scotland, Search our collections \(nms.ac.uk\)](https://nms.ac.uk)

¹⁹ Callander 1921, 120-131; the pottery has been discussed more recently - see MacSween 2002 and MacKie 2007, 830.

²⁰ Graham-Campbell 1995, 159.

topping of the wall heads, and vegetation control. The condition of the site is regularly monitored, and any remedial works recorded.

2.2 Evidential values

The evidential value of Dun Beag is high, both for what the site in its excavated state demonstrates about the ground plan of brochs, and for its archaeological potential. Within the broch there may still be some deposits surviving in the gallery. There is no record of excavation outside the broch and, based on other excavations on Skye, occupation deposits and deposits associated with the construction of the broch may survive.²¹

The location of the broch is typical of many Skye brochs – on a rocky knoll, presumably to provide a well-drained site and to give the building prominence. Like many of the Skye brochs, building on the edge of the knoll gives the impression of added height. The siting of the broch also provided a source for raw materials and there are a number of quarry pits around the knoll which could provide evidence about the procurement of building materials for the broch.

The interior of the site has been excavated and a rich artefact assemblage recovered.²² Although the provenance of many of these finds is not known, nor their stratigraphic relationships, further research on the assemblage could potentially provide a detailed catalogue and a wider discussion. The finds recovered indicate that occupation of the broch was more than temporary, and there is potential for the further recovery of artefactual and eco-factual remains within the galleries and around the broch. The location of midden material could provide information which would help to interpret the finds from the excavations.²³

There is a growing body of Iron Age material from Skye with the recent excavations at the cave site of High Pasture Cave near Broadford²⁴ and the coastal rock shelter site at Fiscavaig²⁵ adding to the finds from the excavations at the ‘semi-broch’ of Dun Ardtreck;²⁶ the brochs at Dun Flodigarry,²⁷ Dun Colbost²⁸ and Dun Fiadhairdt;²⁹ and a number of excavated souterrains.³⁰ The ongoing work for the publication of the excavations at High Pasture Cave affords an opportunity to synthesise the

²¹ MacSween and Reed 1994 (occupation deposits at Dun Colbost); Martlew 1985 (construction deposits at Dun Flodigarry).

²² Callander 1921, 120-131.

²³ This was done at Upper Scalloway, Shetland – see Sharples 1997, 73-77.

²⁴ [Trove ID 273776, Skye, Uamh an Ard Achadh \(trove.scot\)](#)

²⁵ [Trove ID 295995, Uamh An Eich Bhric \(trove.scot\)](#)

²⁶ MacKie 2002a.

²⁷ Martlew 1985.

²⁸ MacSween and Reed 1994.

²⁹ MacLeod 1915.

³⁰ Miket 2002.

existing evidence for the island and should, in due course, provide a more detailed regional context for the excavations at Dun Beag.

Dun Beag sits within a group of archaeological sites – Dun Mor, an enclosure, sits on higher ground to the north; there are various small structures around the knoll; and field boundaries radiate out from the base of the knoll. There is potential for detailed survey and recording of these sites to provide a better understanding of the local context of the main occupation of Dun Beag.

2.3 Historical values

2.3.1 Understanding the Iron Age in Scotland

Dun Beag, and the other brochs of Scotland, are of exceptional importance because of their contribution to our understanding of Iron Age society and way of life.

There is a wide range of stone-built structures in the north and west of Scotland. Within Skye these range from large enclosures encircling hilltops or cutting off substantial promontories, to small promontory enclosures and duns, to earth houses and hut circles.³¹ As yet, there are not enough well-dated sites to form a detailed understanding of how these sites relate, either locally or regionally.

Studies of broch architecture (and that of other fortified Iron Age sites in the west) can give an insight not only into construction techniques, but also their perceived function. The motivation for construction appears to be a desire to build structures which provided a measure of security for those occupying them, and also to make a statement in the landscape relating to the social status of the builders.

We do not understand the complexities of the structure of Iron Age society. However, broch building seems to reflect a desire to protect people and possessions, which arguably implies a threat, - either locally-based or from further afield. Recent work³² analysing the resources needed for broch construction indicate that each broch represents the work of a substantial community, somewhat larger than a single extended family.

If the artefact assemblage from Dun Beag is contemporary with its construction, this would fit with the interpretation of brochs as the home of a family rather than a defensive outpost. As has been noted above, the artefacts recovered from Dun Beag indicate that a range of household tasks and skilled craft activities were carried out at the site.

³¹ MacSween 1984.

³² Barber 2018.

The medieval and later artefacts evidence more recent activity at the broch but it is not clear whether this represents later long-term occupation, occasional occupation or casual visits.

2.3.2 Association with historical figures

The connection of Dun Beag with early tourists and documenters such as Thomas Pennant, Dr Samuel Johnson and James Boswell is of interest both for their descriptions of the site and for their interpretation of it. It also implies that these structures were held in some respect at that time, sufficient at least to induce local landowners to direct illustrious visitors to them.

Thomas Pennant visited Dun Beag while on Skye in 1772, as part of his tour of Scotland published in 1774. He described it as ‘a beautiful Danish fort on the top of a rock, formed with the most excellent masonry.’ He noted that ‘Within are the vestiges of five apartments, one in the centre, four around’ but it is not clear whether he is describing structures within the broch courtyard or the cells and passages within the walls. He goes on to describe a large rock with precipitous sides about a furlong to the north-west (the location of Dun Mor), with the ruin of a thick wall and which he had been told was designed ‘for the security of cattle’. He noted that in Gaelic these forts were called universally ‘duns’. Pennant’s book includes an etching of the site by Moses Griffiths which shows it surviving to a similar height to today, with vegetation growing from the wall-heads.³³

The following year, on 22 Sept 1773 Dr Samuel Johnson and his travelling companion and biographer, James Boswell, visited Dun Beag.³⁴ Their host, Mr Macqueen, referred to the site as possibly a ‘Danish fort’, although Johnson noted that it was also believed to be the original seat of the MacLeod chiefs. The visit was reported in Johnson’s account *Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland* where he noted the lack of a water source, and it was interpreted as an enclosure built to keep cattle safe from robbers.³⁵ Interestingly, Johnson and Boswell had with them a copy of Martin Martin’s *Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (1703). Martin, a native of Skye, remarked on the forts around the coast of Skye and attributed their construction to the Danes.

Sir Walter Scott is said to have been taken to the site when he visited Dunvegan Castle in 1814. As there is no mention of such a visit in his *Journal*, this seems unlikely, given the interest he showed in brochs elsewhere – notably in Shetland, which he visited in the same year.³⁶

³³ Pennant 1774, 292-4.

³⁴ Johnson, S and Boswell, J 1775 (1984 edn).

³⁵ Johnson, S and Boswell, J 1775 (1984 edn), 83-4.

³⁶ Callander 1921, 110; Insert Scott journal reference.

2.3.3 Excavator

The excavation by Countess Vincent Baillet de Latour is of interest because it connects the site with some of the earliest documented fieldwork by female archaeologists in Scotland. The earliest female Fellows were elected into the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1901 and by the time the Countess was elected in 1915 there were only 12 other females out of a total of 740 Fellows.³⁷ Prior to this, from 1870, women could join the Society only as 'Lady Associates', restricted to 25 at any time, and their results could be communicated only via a Fellow.

The Countess's association with Skye was through her marriage in 1881 to Norman Macleod of Macleod, of Dunvegan Castle. At the time of her marriage to Macleod she was Johanna von Ettingshausen, a young Austrian baroness. The couple were based in London but spent the summers in Skye and, around 1892, Johanna carried out excavations at Dun Fiadhairdt, a broch to the north-west of the castle. When Norman MacLeod died in 1885, Johanna continued to spend time in Skye at Dunvegan Castle's dower house, Uiginish Lodge. In 1897 she married Count Vincenz Baillet de Latour, Austria's Education Minister.³⁸

Johanna, now Countess Vincenz Baillet de Latour, carried out the excavation at Dun Beag between 1914 and 1920, with two workmen. The finds were donated to the National Museum and the excavation was reported on by J. Graham Callander, Director of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland.³⁹

2.3.4 Surveys

Archaeologists have returned to the site and published information and interpretations since these excavations. In 1921 the site was surveyed as part of the work for the compilation of an Inventory of the Outer Hebrides, Skye and the Small Isles by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland which was published in 1928.⁴⁰

In February 1999 a survey of the site was carried out by Roger Miket and Martin Wildgoose to assist Historic Scotland in rescheduling the site.⁴¹

Dun Beag is included in Euan MacKie's comprehensive gazetteer of roundhouses, brochs and wheelhouses in Scotland, published in 2007,⁴² and also Tanya Romankiewicz's survey, published in 2011.⁴³

³⁷ Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society 1915, vol XLIX, prelim pages xvii-xxix.

³⁸ [Dalglish, K \(2016\). 'The Countess, the Chief and the two brochs'. Answers on a Postcard 08 February \(answersonapostcard.weebly.com\)](http://Dalglish.K(2016).TheCountess,theChiefandthetwobrochs.AnswersonaPostcard08February(answersonapostcard.weebly.com))

³⁹ Callander 1921.

⁴⁰ RCAHMS 1928.

⁴¹ Miket 1999.

⁴² MacKie 2007, 828-31; figures 915-20.

⁴³ Romankiewicz 2011, 332-35 (visited 13/5/2005).

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

2.4.1 Design

The ground plan of the site is important for the study of the development and layout of brochs. While the same broad range of features is replicated from site to site, there is considerable variation in the combination of features from broch to broch, and there is potential for further study of their design and siting, and identification of any regional or local groupings.⁴⁴

The lack of levelling of the ground surface of some brochs has led archaeologists to conclude that the living space was on an upper, presumably wooden, floor and that the ground floor may have been reserved for storage or livestock.⁴⁵

2.4.2 Construction

Dun Beag broch is constructed of basalt blocks which are uneven in size, and set in approximately level courses. The build is neat for this kind of material, with small pinning stones filling in spaces around the larger blocks. It is possible that this material was quarried from the rocky knoll on which the broch sits. From the exterior, the inward slope or batter of the exterior wall face is apparent around most of the circumference, although there is a stretch of walling in the north-east sector where the outer skin has fallen away leaving a stretch of exposed core which is constructed in rough courses.

2.4.3 Artists' representations

The best-known artist's representation of Dun Beag is the 1774 engraving by Moses Griffiths for Pennant.⁴⁶ More recently the engraver Paul Kershaw, a Skye-based artist, made a print featuring a detail of the stairway.⁴⁷

The broch is often photographed with the Cuillin as a backdrop. Photographs of Dun Beag have featured on the front cover of a number of books, including Ian Armit's *Towers of the North*⁴⁸ and Ann MacSween and Mick Sharp's *Prehistoric Scotland*.⁴⁹

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

Dun Beag is located on the end of a rocky eminence in an open moorland, on rising ground. The siting of the broch on the end of the eminence would have had the visual effect of increasing its overall height. As there is room

⁴⁴ MacSween 1985.

⁴⁵ Sharples 1998, Armit 2003.

⁴⁶ Pennant 1774, 292-4.

⁴⁷ [Paul L. Kershaw. Printmaker and Printer. Prints 1985-1989 \(plkershaw.co.uk\)](http://plkershaw.co.uk) (1987).

⁴⁸ Armit 2003.

⁴⁹ MacSween and Sharp 1989.

on the eminence to build back from the edge, and it would have been easier to do so, this seems to be a deliberate choice, to make the structure more prominent in the landscape – a similar feature is seen at **Dun Carloway**⁵⁰ in Lewis and at **Dun Dornaigil** in northern Sutherland.

On the higher ground to the north is the site of Dun Mor enclosure, but the chronological relationship between the two sites is not known. The location of the broch gives panoramic views across Loch Bracadale to the south and west, and toward the Cuillin to the east. The location provides a good vantage point for viewing the surrounding area.

There are no modern buildings in close proximity to the broch (2019). The location feels remote and it is possible to observe the relationship of the broch to the topography of the area.

2.6 Natural heritage values

Dun Beag does not lie within the boundaries of any areas which are currently protected for natural heritage.⁵¹

Its situation, on sheep-grazed, grassy moorland overlooking the partly wooded slopes which run towards Loch Bracadale, means that it is visited by a wide range of birds. Frequently sighted raptors include both white-tailed eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* and golden eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* as well as peregrine falcon *Falco peregrinus*, merlin *Falco columbarius* and common buzzard *Buteo buteo*. Moorland birds including curlew *Numenius arquata* and redshank *Tringa totanus* nest nearby, as do smaller species such as meadow pipit *Anthus pratensis* and skylark *Alauda arvensis*. Corncrakes *Crex crex* maintain a tenuous foothold in Skye and are occasionally heard near Dun Beag.

2.7 Contemporary/use values

Dun Beag is one of only a few archaeological sites on Skye with on-site interpretation. The information provided at Dun Beag helps visitors to understand the site and also the wider context of broch building.

Dun Beag is promoted on a number of websites including The Skye Guide, where it is described as ‘the best known, the best preserved, and the most accessible broch on Skye’.⁵² Tourism is a major part of the island’s economy and Skye is a popular destination for a wide range of visitors

⁵⁰ Throughout the text, site names in **bold** are managed by Historic Environment Scotland and are publicly accessible. Access information can be found at: [HES Visit a Place \(historicenvironment.scot\)](https://www.historicenvironment.scot)

⁵¹ SNH website accessed 26 September 2019.

⁵² [The Skye Guide \(2024\). Skye’s Best-Preserved Broch and Its Forgotten Neighbor. Dun Mor. 14 October \(theskyeguide.com\)](https://www.theskyeguide.com)

including walkers and an increasing number of small group tours. There are only a few paid-for tourist attractions in north-west Skye and many people spend their time on the island walking and visiting heritage and landscape sites. Visitor reviews on online platforms such as Tripadvisor frequently mention the beautiful outlook from the site, the peacefulness and tranquillity it offers, and that the view from the top is well worth the short walk.⁵³

The relative ease of access with car parking close by, makes Dun Beag a good site for group visits, although the car park is across the main road from the site. Sheep often graze in the vicinity of the site, and visitors are advised to keep dogs on leads.

As the only Guardianship site on Skye, Dun Beag provides an opportunity to showcase Historic Environment Scotland's role in looking after Scotland's heritage, and there is potential for further information to be included, perhaps detailing how the site is maintained and conserved.

There are opportunities to explore the potential for community-focussed events based at Dun Beag, such as the provision of ranger-guided walks. At the time of writing, a proposal had been drafted by the Struan Community Development Trust to create a community hub near the broch. Scoping works involved an archaeological walkover survey, the results for which provide a useful context for the broch within its wider archaeological landscape.

3. MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

There are a wide range of unanswered questions surrounding brochs in general, despite two centuries of excavation, study and theorising (see Appendix 3). Dun Beag has already contributed to the existing body of broch knowledge, but retains the potential to contribute further. That said, its history of disturbance and consolidation means that it would not necessarily be the first choice of broch site to investigate in search of additional knowledge about brochs in general. Nonetheless, Dun Beag retains potential to contribute to answering the following questions, most of which might be asked in similar terms about any broch:

- When were brochs such as Dun Beag first constructed, and how did they relate to pre-existing architecture and settlement patterns? The artefactual evidence suggests the broch had been built and was being occupied no later than the last century BC: further work might refine this. Despite a rich body of survey data for Atlantic Scotland which includes brochs, duns, vitrified forts, hillforts, promontory forts, simple roundhouses, complex roundhouses, crannogs and

⁵³ [Tripadvisor. Dun Beag reviews \(tripadvisor.co.uk\)](https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk)

souterrains, the analysis of this data is limited by the lack of detailed chronological frameworks. This has been identified as a research priority by the Scottish Archaeological Research Framework.⁵⁴ An updated audit of existing chronological frameworks analysing dates, artefact sequences and structural sequences was identified as a possible starting point in the 2001 research agenda for the Iron Age.⁵⁵ Further work at Dun Beag could contribute. While the information on the chronology of the broch from the Countess's excavations is limited to the dating of the artefacts, it may be possible to determine a date, even if only a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the broch. As has been successfully achieved through the sophisticated sampling strategies employed at Old Scatness⁵⁶ and Thrumster.⁵⁷ Taken at face value, the artefacts already demonstrate that Dun Beag has been built, used, abandoned, repaired and reused time and again. But it would be helpful to refine this chronology to illuminate the age and duration of its several episodes of use been comprehensively surveyed.

- Are all brochs identical or are there variations: if so, what does this mean? While many brochs have been excavated, examples are spread across Scotland and there is not enough data on the layout of the floorplans to be able to determine more than broad geographical or chronological trends. While we can say that the floor plan of Dun Beag, with its ground gallery, is more typical of west-coast rather than northern brochs, more detailed plans are required to pick up local and regional groupings. As more data on floor plans becomes available, Dun Beag's floor plan can be included in reanalysis of the Skye sites. Romankiewicz compared features of many brochs and concluded that the patterns in the data suggested a strong regional character for their architecture, reflected in the use of different building methods which are adjusted to local conditions and materials.⁵⁸
- What building techniques were employed? Visual inspection of the exterior walls at Dun Beag provides hints of building lines and perhaps also to changes in the build at various points. Detailed scanning of the walls and analysis of the results would no doubt test these observations. Building lines may relate to control of horizontality while the masonry variations, although not conclusive, may point to the operations of separate work crews during the build process. Thus, even in its greatly reduced state, Dun Beag retains the potential to provide information on the construction as well as the

⁵⁴ [Scottish Archaeological Research Framework \(scarf.scot\)](http://scarf.scot)

⁵⁵ Haselgrove et al, 2001.

⁵⁶ Dockrill et al, 2015, 161-204.

⁵⁷ Barber, J. forthcoming.

⁵⁸ Romankiewicz 2011, vol I, 3.

decomposition of brochs; something of critical importance to scholars, and of considerable interest to visitors.

- Was the broch built by or for incomers, or was it created by the existing holders of the area? Due to extensive excavation within the broch, this might be difficult to answer directly: evidence might take the form of distinct differences in the character of artefacts firmly associated with the broch as opposed to what came before. Simply identifying deposits of the appropriate date(s) would be challenging but perhaps not impossible. Indirect approaches to this question are possible: it has been argued that the variation in design and the evidence for skill in the use of locally-available stone implies a direct relationship between the builders and the pre-existing inhabitants and that there is no reason to assume that the builders and inhabitants were not the same people.⁵⁹
- How does the broch structure at Dun Beag relate to the construction date and pre-construction history of other local brochs? This cannot be addressed without answers to the previous questions, and also dating evidence from more brochs.
- How well does what we see at Dun Beag today represent what was built? The remains seem not to have been radically altered in the course of excavation and consolidation, and the earliest records suggest that Dun Beag may never have stood as high as some other brochs, though this would be hard to prove.
- What can be said about the social and territorial organisation of those who lived at Dun Beag? Moving from observations on settlement patterns to models of social structure is challenging, although the preservation of archaeological data in Atlantic Scotland makes it an ideal area for such studies.⁶⁰ Many of the studies of social structure start with models for land division. These include models for wheelhouses and Atlantic roundhouses in Uist⁶¹, and for brochs and hut circles in Caithness and Sutherland,⁶² and brochs in Shetland.⁶³ Further survey work around Dun Beag could contribute to similar modelling of the Skye data. Most researchers would support the existence of an elite within Iron Age society, who would have directed the activity of each group (including the building of brochs) and conducted relationships with neighbouring groups and perhaps further afield. It has been suggested that this evolved into a “chiefdom” type of society, perhaps analogous to later Highland clans, with a chief and a few senior individuals leading a “client

⁵⁹ Romankiewicz 2011, vol I, 71.

⁶⁰ Barrett 1981.

⁶¹ Armit 2005.

⁶² Cowley 2005.

⁶³ Fojut 1982, 2005a.

group” bound by kinship ties, living in multiple locations across a substantial area of land. In the case of Dun Beag, such narratives may be amplified by the evidence from non-broch Iron Age structures which have been excavated in Skye and further afield. Survey work in the area around the broch⁶⁴ has identified a range of features – wall lines, quarries and building outlines which add to the local sites already identified including Dun Mor, a substantial enclosure to the north, and a number of hut circles. Excavations on these structures would provide evidence about their dates, durations and functions which could refine our understanding of activities relating to the period of use of the broch and earlier and later settlement in the locality. Defining Dun Beag’s chronological relationship with Dun Mor enclosure and the hut circles in the immediate area would improve our understanding of the site’s local context and help in defining the group value of the monuments. As more information is obtained from excavations, the result is increased complexity. The recent excavations at High Pasture Cave and Fiscavaig rock shelter on Skye⁶⁵ have highlighted the wide range of Iron Age settlement types on the island. The information from Dun Beag can be reassessed in future regional studies.

- How did the people associated with brochs survive day to day, in terms of subsistence? We know from excavations in various locations that farming was the main source of food and probably of wealth throughout this period, although Dun Beag itself has produced little evidence of such activity.
- Was there long-distance trade or was everything produced locally? Dun Beag has produced a wide variety of artefactual evidence suggesting metal and possibly glass-working on site. Fragments of metal and working residues include material which could not have come from the immediate vicinity. However, the poor stratigraphy of the site makes it hard to attribute a date to this, and much if not all of it may date to later use of the part-ruined broch as a workshop. More might be done with modern scientific techniques to consider the sources of this material. Some reanalysis has already been carried out for individual artefact types. The pottery was recently reassessed.⁶⁶ A date range of 100 BC to AD 200 was suggested for the decorated Iron Age pottery and the possibility that some of the pottery is of Norse or Medieval date was raised. Reassessments such as this are hampered by the lack of a detailed ceramic sequence for the first millennium BC which requires improved analysis of individual site assemblages. Reanalysis of the glass beads has also been carried out

⁶⁴ Miket 1999.

⁶⁵ [Birch, S., Case Study: High Pasture Cave, ScARF \(scarf.scot\)](#)

⁶⁶ MacSween 2002.

and concluded that the rich blue glass beads, one hexagonal, one more globular may have been confined to the late Roman period.⁶⁷

More general questions remain, regarding:

- The appearance of the roof and upper levels of this and other brochs.
- The social organisation of those building and using the broch, and how they disposed of their dead.
- The nature and appearance of the contemporary landscape and vegetation surrounding the broch.
- A more precise chronology: no scientific dates currently exist.

4. ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

- Mousa (broch, Shetland)
- Clickimin (broch, Shetland)
- Jarlshof (broch and settlement, Shetland)
- Gurness (broch and settlement, Orkney)
- Midhowe (broch and settlement, Orkney)
- Edin's Hall (lowland broch, Scottish Borders)
- Dun Carloway (broch, Lewis)
- Dun Telve and Dun Troddan (two neighbouring brochs, Glenelg, Highland)
- Dun Dornaigil (broch, Highland)
- Carn Liath (broch, Highland)

5. KEYWORDS

Skye; Dun Beag; Broch; Iron Age; Ground-galleried; Intra-mural stair; Batter; Complex Atlantic roundhouse; Quarry; Countess Vincent Baillet de Latour.

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⁶⁷ Guido 1978, 96-7 and 217. A later fourth century AD date is suggested.

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Note: Footnotes throughout the text offer page numbers where appropriate. If no page number is given, this indicates that reference is being made to the general thrust of the publication cited rather than a specific point of detail.

Further Resources

Trove ID: 11062

Trove Site Number: NG33NW 3

NGR: NG 33951 38634

Trove entry: www.trove.scot/place/11062

Scheduling description for Dun Beag: [HES, SM90325, Dun Beag, broch and surrounding structures, Struan, Skye \(portal.historicenvironment.scot\)](#)

Scheduling description for neighbouring cairn: [HES, SM7930, Dun Beag, cairn 100m SSW of, Struan \(portal.historicenvironment.scot\)](#)

Highland HER site record: [Highland Historic Environment Record, MHG5018, Broch, Dun Beag \(her.highland.gov.uk\)](#)

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: TIMELINE

- **Iron Age:** The building of the broch is thought to date to c.200 BC, based on its finds and from comparison with other, better-dated sites. Its main period of occupation is likely to be some time in the first two centuries BC / first century AD
- **Viking:** A gold ring found at the site is considered to be indicative of Viking connections (Callander 1921, 127)
- **Medieval and later:** Coins recovered during the excavations may derive from visits to the site between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries (Callander 1921, 127)
- **Early visits:** Early recorded visits to the site are recounted in accounts by Thomas Pennant (visited in 1769) and Samuel Johnson and James Boswell (visited in 1770).
- **Excavations:** Excavations were carried out between 1914 and 1920 by Countess Vincent Baillet de Latour, one of the early female Fellows of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

- **Visit by RCAHMS:** The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland visited the site and recorded it on 11 June 1921 as part of their survey of Skye and the Western Isles.
- **Guardianship:** Dun Beag was taken into the care of the State in 1980.
- **Survey:** A survey of Dun Beag and the immediate surrounding area was commissioned in 1999 by Historic Scotland and carried out by Roger Miket. Quarries, field walls and structures (probably later than the broch) were recorded.
- **Rescheduling:** Dun Beag Broch, Struanmore was rescheduled on 3 July 2000 as 'Dun Beag, broch and surrounding structures, Struan, Skye'.⁶⁸ The extension includes quarry pits and field walls and cairns which may be broadly contemporary with the broch, and the remains of houses, outbuildings and fields of later date. Traces of rig-and-furrow cultivation can be seen in several of the field plots
- **Walkover Survey:** In May 2019 an archaeological walkover survey was completed within the Struan Community Development Area in advance of the proposed development of a community hub.

APPENDIX 2: IMAGES

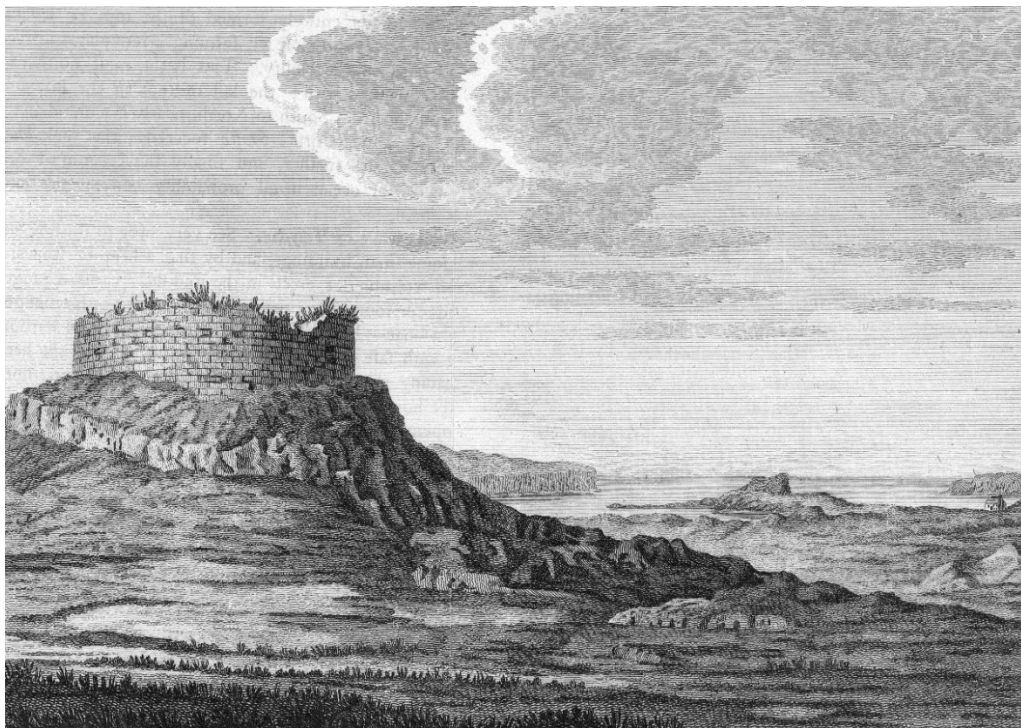


Figure 2: Engraving of view of Dun Beag. From T Pennant, 'A Tour in Scotland, 1769', pl.xxxvi (SC1009584) © Crown Copyright: HES

⁶⁸ [HES SM90325. Dun Beag, broch and surrounding structures, Struan, Skye \(portal.historicenvironment.scot\)](#)

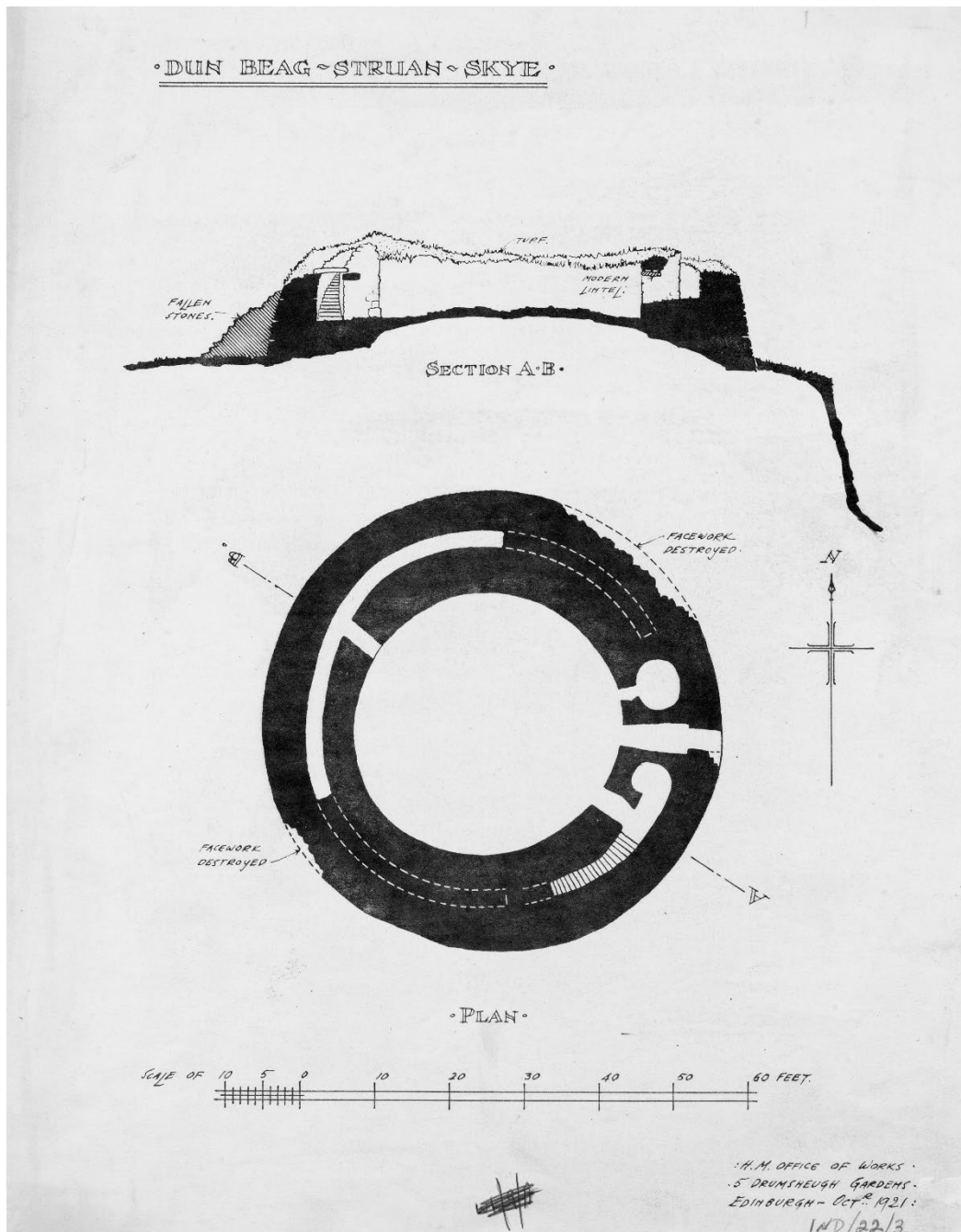


Figure 3: Plan and Section of Dun Beag, 1921.(DP 208026) © Crown Copyright: HES

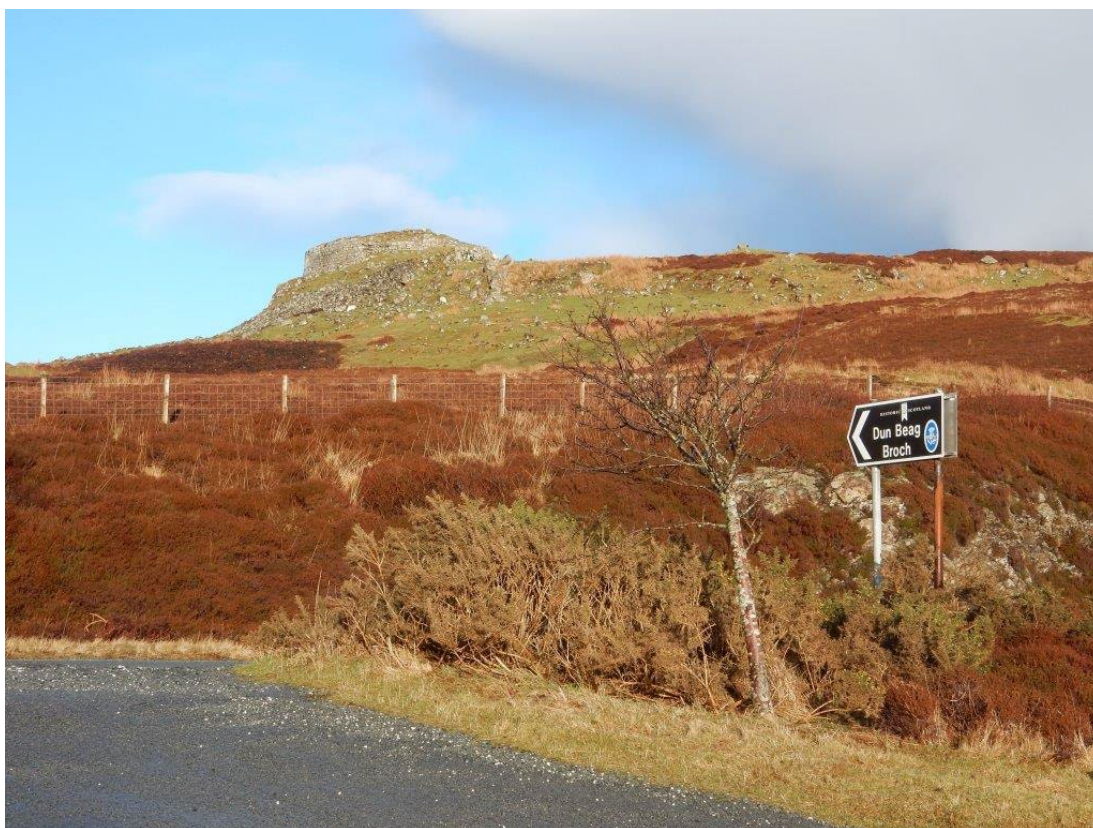


Figure 4: Dun Beag, looking north-east from car park ©Ann MacSween



Figure 5: Dun Beag, showing position west end of rocky outcrop ©Ann MacSween



Figure 6: Dun Beag, looking from east, showing position of information panel, near entrance ©Ann MacSween



Figure 7: Dun Beag, information panel. ©Ann MacSween



Figure 8: Dun Beag, looking along entrance into courtyard ©Ann MacSween



Figure 9: Dun Beag, looking across courtyard to entrance ©Ann MacSween

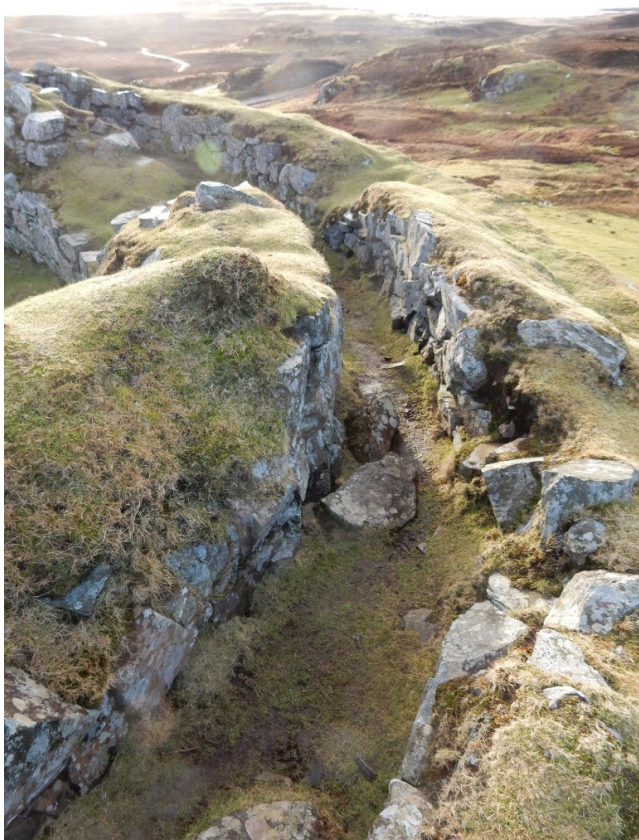


Figure 9: Dun Beag, gallery, western sector ©Ann MacSween



Figure 10: Dun Beag, stair ©Ann MacSween



Fig 11: Dun Beag, cell beside entrance, from above ©Ann MacSween



Figure 12: Dun Beag, end of gallery / cell beside stair ©Ann MacSween



Figure 13: Dun Beag, view to north-west – MacLeod's Tables ©Ann MacSween



Figure 14: Dun Beag, view to north, with Dun Mor on highest point ©Ann MacSween

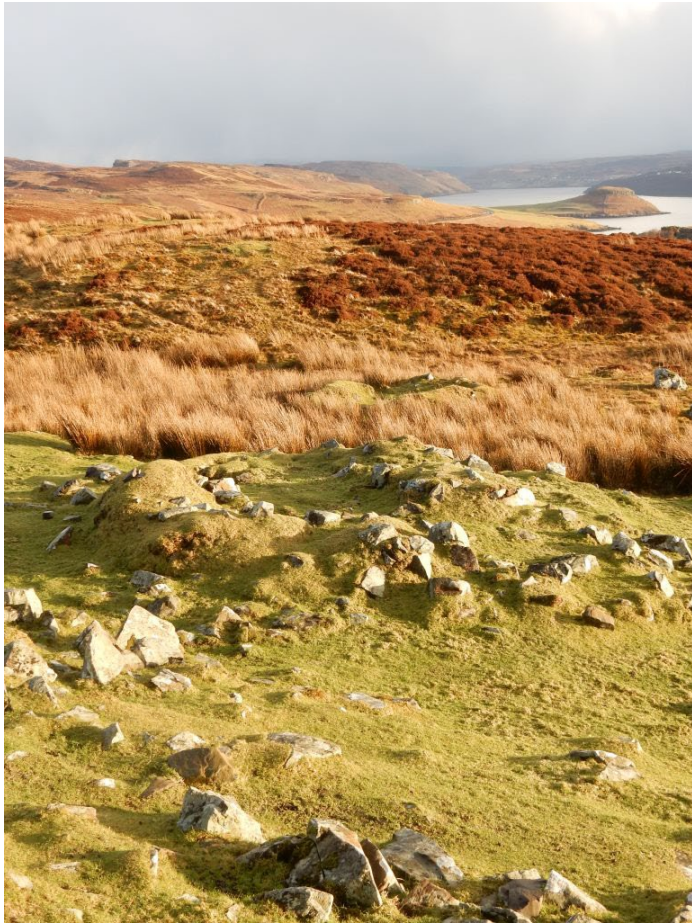


Figure 15: Dun Beag, view to south-east, showing later structures ©Ann MacSween



Figure 16: Dun Beag, looking from east ©Ann MacSween



Figure 17: Dun Beag, south-west sector, showing collapsed masonry ©Ann MacSween



Figure 18: Dun Beag, detail of wall showing pinnings ©Ann MacSween

APPENDIX 3: BROCHS – THEORIES AND INTERPRETATIONS

Defining brochs

For the purpose of this and other similar documents, the term “broch” is used to refer to what some researchers have called “fully formed” or “tower” brochs. There is no way of knowing exactly how many such structures once stood to heights approaching Mousa’s 13 metres plus, only that the visible surviving remains of many sites do not rule this out.

Dryden first attempted to define brochs in 1872:

A broch is a circular tower formed of wall 10 to 16f thick at the base, enclosing a court from 24 to 38f diameter, with one entrance from the outside into the court. The usual thickness of wall is about 15f, and the usual diameter of the court about 28f. All were in outline truncated cones – that is, the outside of the wall “batters” or inclines inwards. The wall is also decreased in thickness towards the top by set-offs inside. The chambers of the broch proper are in the thickness of the walls, but there are usually partitions in the court of later construction. The original height of these towers of course varied, and except Mousa, we have no broch more than 20f high, but Mousa is still 40f high and was somewhat more. No mortar was used in them, but probably the chinks were stopped with moss or mud just as in modern Shetland cottages.⁶⁹

There have been a number of definitions over intervening years, of which, that by MacKie in 1965, refreshed in 2002, remains the most influential. MacKie offered a tight definition of brochs, to distinguish them from other drystone structures of broadly similar date. For MacKie, for a structure to be classed as a broch required five essential characteristics which must all occur in combination: (1) a circular ground-plan, (2) a thick wall, (3) large size, (4) a ledge (or scarcement) on its inside wall face and (5) at least one “hollow wall feature” from a list of four: (5a) an upper gallery (that is, a hollow wall at a level higher than the ground level), (5b) a chamber over the entrance passage, (5c) a void or voids in the inner wall-face and (5d) an intra-mural stair at an upper level.

MacKie noted that some “classic” features of brochs, such as their narrow and well-built entrance passages, occur in other types of structure. He also excluded from broch-defining characteristics the possession of a hollow wall at the ground level only, and also the possession of a stair which starts at ground level unless it rises to a much higher level.

As MacKie noted, relatively few of the c.600 sites referred to as brochs can be shown to possess this set of features, and he proposed that “probable”

⁶⁹ Dryden 1872, 200.

brochs could be defined as possessing features (1) to (4) but not demonstrably possessing any of the hollow wall features, with possible brochs having “no diagnostic features exposed but which seem likely from their situation to be brochs”.⁷⁰

The features of MacKie’s “brochs” and “probable brochs” are known to be present at no more than 15 percent of the 600-plus suggested broch sites in Scotland, and there is no knowing how many of the remainder might, or might not, reveal such features on excavation. This means that Scotland is known to possess at least 80 brochs but could in fact possess many more, not to mention sites lost or destroyed over the centuries before antiquarian interest.

Stepping back from technical structural definitions, it is common practice, where a broch has proved on excavation to be surrounded by a complex of smaller structures and sometimes also by outer walls and ditches, to refer to the entire site simply as a broch – Edin’s Hall falls into this category, where the broch acts as signifier for a larger and more complex site.

Brochs are unique to Scotland, and one of Scotland’s few “endemic” prehistoric architectural forms. Their greatest concentration is in Orkney, Shetland, Caithness and East Sutherland, with more examples scattered rather more thinly across the Western Isles, Skye and the adjacent mainland. Edin’s Hall is one of the few examples located outside the Highlands and Islands.

A brief account of broch studies

Brochs have been the subject of more research and discussion than perhaps any other type of ancient monument. It is necessary to review these antiquarian and archaeological debates in some detail, because the significance of Mousa (and other brochs in State care) lies to a considerable extent in how each site offers, or could offer, evidence in support of competing definitions of “broch-ness” and towards competing narratives about the origins, date, nature and purpose of these enigmatic sites. The outcome of a huge amount of study appears to be that very few of the key questions about brochs have been resolved, while at the same time new and even less answerable questions have been stimulated. All narratives rely to some extent on assumptions, and the most which can be hoped is that these are made explicit.

The word “broch” was being used by antiquarians alongside “brough”, “burgh” and “Picts’ House / Castle” by the early 1800s, and the “broch” spelling was formally adopted by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in the early 1870s, though older usages lingered for a generation. Initially it signified a structure which was either, like Mousa, a tall-standing tower, or

⁷⁰ MacKie 2002, 1-2.

which had a lower height but showed sufficient structural detail for its similarity with surviving tall-standing examples to be asserted with confidence.

It is worth noting in passing that “broch” does not seem to have been in popular usage for this class of structure: the only pre-1800 use of “broch” was in relation to the town of Fraserburgh, where Scotland’s first planned “new town” was created in the late 1500s and early 1600s, and referred to as “Fraser’s broch” or “Fraser’s burgh”,⁷¹ suggesting that broch was a northern synonym for burgh. The nickname Broch is still in popular use today, especially in local newspapers, where it allows for a larger typeface and more striking headlines than does Fraserburgh.⁷² And in the Western Isles and wider Gaelic-speaking area, the term “broch” was not used locally, even though the Old Norse root “borg” appears as “barp”- and “borve” in many place-names. The word dùn, a generic Gaelic word for fort, was used exclusively for all man-made prehistoric sites which appeared to be of a defensive nature.

As archaeological research and fieldwork progressed, the number of “possible” broch sites has risen to about 600,⁷³ although as time passed, the majority of sites so designated were usually no more than large grass-covered mounds of masonry of approximately the right dimensions, which in their physical appearance and siting appeared to informed observers less like a large burial cairn and more like a broch – a rather unsatisfactory approach, but one which persists in modern research.

A recent estimate is that only about 150 of 600+ “possible” broch sites show any details of built masonry at all, with about half of these, 70 or 80, either surviving as towers or showing sufficient structural evidence to suggest they could once have achieved such a height.⁷⁴ That said, when “possible” broch sites have been tested by full or partial excavation, or otherwise disturbed, they do prove more often than not to reveal features allowing them to be counted as brochs.⁷⁵ Additional “possible” sites continue to be added, and in some cases demonstrated to be brochs.⁷⁶ In summary, Scotland has at least 80 brochs, but may have many more.

It has been accepted from the early days of serious study that few other brochs had ever stood quite as tall as **Mousa** and the other partially surviving towers such as **Duns Troddan**, **Telve** and **Carloway**, though views vary radically as to just how many were towers at all. Scott in 1947 argued

⁷¹ Oram et al, 5.

⁷² One memorable headline from the Press and Journal, in 1980: “Broch man told lies to gain credit”.

⁷³ Armit 2003.

⁷⁴ Barber 2018.

⁷⁵ For example, Cloddie Knowe, trial trenched in 1988 (MacKie 2002 p 82).

⁷⁶ For example, Channerwick, revealed in winter 2013/14, [SCAPE, Channerwick Broch, Shetland \(scapetrust.org\)](https://www.scapetrust.org) accessed 6 September 2018 (illustration also shows Mousa used as the archetype of a broch).

that only a dozen or so tall towers had ever existed across Scotland, with the rest simple solidly built low-rise farmhouses.⁷⁷ Graham immediately disputed this, based on data from Royal Commission surveys, and his view, that the majority of brochs were tall enough to be imposing, if not as lofty as Mousa, has tended to prevail since then.⁷⁸

Attempts to define “true” or “tower” brochs as distinct from a wider class of drystone forts and duns have tended to centre on the presence of specific constructional features: near-circular ground plan, hollow or galleried wall construction, single narrow entrance passage, staircase within the wall thickness, a wall thick enough to have supported a sufficient height to act as a defence, etcetera.⁷⁹

Although early commentators tended to agree that brochs were originally unroofed towers, over time, opinion has shifted to the extent that most commentators, while disagreeing about details, accept that brochs contained significant internal fittings, typically including one or more raised floors and some form of a roof, and that timber was the major component of these “now vanished” elements. However, such features are in all cases inferred, based on what makes best sense of surviving stone-built features, such as scarcement ledges. Initially, it was suggested that broch roofs were “obviously” annular, lean-to structures leaving the centre for the inner space open to the sky (for light and smoke to escape).⁸⁰ More recently, broch reconstructions have tended to feature conical roofs sitting on the wall-head or just below it, with the weight taken by stout posts.⁸¹ Fojut (sceptically) and most recently Romankiewicz (more optimistically) are among those who have recently published on possible roofing structures.⁸²

Physical evidence for such features is extremely rare amongst excavated broch sites, and even at the only two brochs where evidence of really substantial floor-set timber posts has been found, **Dun Troddan** (Highland)⁸³ and Leckie (Stirlingshire),⁸⁴ these cannot conclusively be confirmed as having been constructed at the same time as the brochs.⁸⁵ The need for caution is emphasised by the substantial post-rings found at

⁷⁷ Scott 1947.

⁷⁸ Graham 1947a and 1947b.

⁷⁹ MacKie 2002, 1-2.

⁸⁰ Curle 1921, 90-92.

⁸¹ For example, that by Alan Braby, widely reproduced, for example, in Armit and Fojut 1998, 15.

⁸² Fojut 2005b, 194-6; Romankiewicz 2016, 17-19.

⁸³ Curle 1921, 90-92.

⁸⁴ MacKie 2007, 1312-3 (see also MacKie 2016 for more detailed account).

⁸⁵ Fojut 2005b, 192-3.

Buchlyvie (Stirlingshire)⁸⁶ and **Carn Liath** (Highland – Sutherland)⁸⁷ which in both cases can be shown to relate to pre-broch roundhouses.⁸⁸

If all brochs were indeed fitted out in timber, this would have interesting implications for wider relationships and poses the question of how quality timber for construction was obtained by those living in relatively treeless areas such as Shetland or the Western Isles.⁸⁹ The earlier view, that brochs as first constructed were not intended to be roofed, still has adherents, who offer an alternative view of brochs as a network of defensive lookout towers built in response to the threat of raiding or invasion. Smith has recently re-opened this debate by suggesting that Mousa and some other (although not all) brochs were never intended to be roofed.⁹⁰

Broch origins

The date and antecedents of brochs have been pushed progressively earlier. The idea that brochs were built by the Danes or Vikings⁹¹ persisted for some decades, despite the outright rejection of this idea by Scandinavian antiquarians as early as 1852.⁹² The alternative view, that they were built by the native population as watch-towers against the Vikings, was also popular⁹³ and led to them being called “Picts’ House” or “Pictish Castle”. However, by the 1880s, it had become generally accepted that brochs were somewhat earlier, dating to what had come to be termed the Iron Age and constructed at a time when the Romans were actively expanding their Empire, further south.⁹⁴

As the discipline of archaeology developed, and in the absence of direct dating evidence, efforts were made to fit brochs into wider perspectives. The idea of a series of “cliff castles” along the west coast of Britain, originating in Cornwall and gradually spreading north as they increased in architectural sophistication and complexity, was proposed,⁹⁵ and led to the dominance of various “diffusionist” models, in which brochs were seen as the strongholds of an incoming elite.⁹⁶ Elaborate “family trees” of Iron Age fortification across western Europe were drawn up, culminating in the broch, and these carried some influence well into the 1980s.⁹⁷

⁸⁶ Main 1989, 296-302.

⁸⁷ Love 1989, 165.

⁸⁸ In this respect, the conjectural plans offered by MacKie for Dun Carloway are perhaps unhelpful. MacKie 2007, 1204.

⁸⁹ Fojut 2005b, 196-9.

⁹⁰ Smith 2016, 15.

⁹¹ Fergusson 1877, 630-9.

⁹² Worsaae 1852, 233.

⁹³ Stuart 1857, 191-2.

⁹⁴ Anderson 1883.

⁹⁵ Childe 1935.

⁹⁶ Scott, 1948.

⁹⁷ Hamilton 1968, 51.

The discovery, in excavated broch sites, of some types of artefacts with similarities to those found in southern England and Brittany was held to support this idea, with any thought that their presence might have arisen through trade being rejected. Clarke and others warned that many of the artefact types cited were much more broadly distributed and in some cases near-ubiquitous⁹⁸ in the middle Iron Age, and could not be relied upon to demonstrate large-scale invasion. That said, most would accept that there were contacts between Iron Age communities living along the European north-western seaboard, so ideas might have been shared, and individuals may have moved from area to area.

The observation has been made that brochs are unlikely to have arisen locally in north and west Scotland because the preceding local Bronze Age seems poor, but this may well be a mis-reading of the evidence: a lack of monumental building does not necessarily imply an impoverished culture.

The fundamental problems for the immigration/invasion hypothesis as an explanation for the appearance of brochs, are (a) why the arrival of people from an area which held no structures anything like brochs should lead to their construction in their new homeland, and (b) why the limited amount of “exotic” pottery which is held to mark their arrival in the area (supposedly at Clickimin) might not have been obtained by trade or by gift exchange.

The idea that brochs were built by “warlike chieftains” to “overawe a subject population”, remained popular,⁹⁹ although not with all commentators. Stewart in 1956 was typically concise in this respect with regard to his homeland:

Shetland at its best had two feudal castles, and all the local lairds of later times (very small fry *indeed*) *would not have added up to the fraction of her hundred brochs, so it is useless to think of a lord controlling a group of serfs... We have a form of life based on a group much larger than the family, and a communal effort to meet some unprecedented sort of danger.*¹⁰⁰

The older, alternative view, that brochs were a unique local invention, began to be revived in the 1950s, notably in Shetland.¹⁰¹ Broad contemporaneity with the Roman presence was still supported, but now with the added idea of brochs as refuges against slave-raiding, possibly by the Romans or by war-bands selling slaves into the Roman Empire. The persistence of immigration, if not invasion, as a stimulus was maintained, with the invention of brochs, probably in Orkney, by a “mixed” population.¹⁰² At the same time, the idea was revived that brochs were

⁹⁸ Clarke 1971.

⁹⁹ RCAHMS 1946 (visited/written 1930), 48-55.

¹⁰⁰ Stewart 1956, 15.

¹⁰¹ O'Neill 1954.

¹⁰² Stewart 1956, 15-16.

built over a very short period and then abandoned or converted into non-defensive structures.¹⁰³

The period of broch construction was still assumed to be in the last century BC and the first century AD (largely on the basis of a few Roman artefacts found in and around brochs). This theory allowed for several centuries of experimentation to “perfect” the broch, wherever it first emerged in its ultimate expression as a tower, although there was a tendency to push this date a little earlier, perhaps into the second or third century BC, with an increasing preference for local invention over external inspiration. There was general agreement that brochs as well-built as Mousa came late in any sequence of structures.¹⁰⁴

The search for the architectural antecedents of brochs produced two competing theories. A ‘western origin’ school saw brochs developing from simpler D-shaped enclosures with some broch features which occur in Skye and the neighbouring mainland, and which MacKie termed semi-brochs, via the “ground galleried” brochs of the west into the “solid-based” brochs of the north.¹⁰⁵ A competing northern origin school of opinion saw brochs arising in Orkney or Caithness (or even in Shetland, where a small number of so-called “blockhouse forts” contain broch-like features, such as wall-base cells, stairways and scarcement ledges).¹⁰⁶ Dating evidence emerged in Orkney during the early 1980s for a few thick-walled roundhouses (such as that at Bu, near Stromness, dating to 600 – 500 BC) which some claimed as forerunners to brochs,¹⁰⁷ although these possessed few, if any, of the classic defining features of brochs.¹⁰⁸ Nonetheless, this led some to believe that brochs might go back as early as 600 BC.¹⁰⁹

Until recently there have been few secure radiocarbon dates for the actual construction of brochs, since few excavators had dug under their massive walls. Almost all dates from broch sites related to deposits within and around them, and almost by definition later than the construction of the brochs on each site – and usually later by an unknowable length of time. This changed with the dating of Dun Vulcan (South Uist) from carbonised grain within the matrix of the wall. Taken with other material nearby, this suggested a construction date in the late 2nd or the 1st century BC. Slightly less securely, the construction of a broch at Upper Scalloway (Shetland) appeared to have taken place in the 1st century AD.¹¹⁰

¹⁰³ Stewart 1956, 15.

¹⁰⁴ Fojut 1981, 226-7.

¹⁰⁵ MacKie 1992; also MacKie 2007, 1094.

¹⁰⁶ Lamb 1980, Fojut 1981.

¹⁰⁷ Hedges and Bell 1980, Hedges 1987.

¹⁰⁸ Armit 1990 p 195.

¹⁰⁹ Fojut 1981, p 34.

¹¹⁰ Parker Pearson et al 1996; Sharples 1998.

The radiocarbon dating of the construction of a fully-formed Shetland broch to the period 400 – 200 BC, at Old Scatness in southern Mainland,¹¹¹ has forced a radical re-thinking of broch origins. The date, from well-stratified animal bone which was fresh at the time of its burial and lay directly under the well-built primary wall of the broch, has confirmed the growing suspicions that brochs were a considerably earlier development than had generally been supposed, at least in the north.

This has not entirely banished an attachment to the idea of immigration as a stimulus for changes in society which led to the appearance of brochs, although its continuing adherents now place the hypothetical arrival of the supposed highly skilled incomers into northern Scotland much earlier, perhaps even at the start of the local Iron Age (around 700 – 600 BC), the new date MacKie has suggested the arrival of the supposed high-status southern immigrants to Shetland.¹¹²

The arguments for this are problematic in the extreme, due to the disturbed nature of the structures and deposits at Clickimin, which Hamilton largely failed to take into account.¹¹³ At Clickimin, key pottery forms with internally fluted rims and sometimes black burnished exteriors, were held by both Hamilton and MacKie to mark the arrival of southern immigrants well before the broch was constructed. It was suggested as early as 1980 that these particular forms of pottery appear not before, but in fact well after, the building of the broch at Clickimin and probably elsewhere in Shetland.¹¹⁴

This interpretation has now gained strong support from the extensive excavations at Old Scatness, where these pottery characteristics consistently appear from the 1st century BC onwards – long after the construction of the broch. A similar date has been ascribed to comparable pottery at Dun Vulcan in South Uist. This change – which may or may not mark the arrival of incoming settlers – is therefore no longer relevant in terms of dating the first appearance of brochs, either in Shetland or in the Western Isles.

MacKie's recent suggestion that brochs were invented first in the north, possibly even in Shetland, and then later reinvented in the west¹¹⁵ seems improbable, and the scenario suggested by Parker Pearson and collaborators more likely,¹¹⁶ with the broch tower invented in the north and only spreading to (or being adopted in) the west considerably later. This is consistent with the fact that in the west brochs are fewer in number and occur interspersed with other small stone forts which were unlikely to have stood as tall. The dating evidence from Clachtoll broch in West Sutherland,

¹¹¹ Dockrill et al 2015, 168-171.

¹¹² MacKie 2008.

¹¹³ Smith, 2014, 4.

¹¹⁴ Fojut 1989, especially 29-31 (first discussed in unpublished PhD thesis 1980).

¹¹⁵ MacKie 2008, 272.

¹¹⁶ Parker Pearson et al 1996, 58-62.

currently (2018) under investigation, should shed light on this, occupying as it does what might be seen as a step on the journey from north to west (or vice versa).

Reinforced by the new dating evidence, and following detailed architectural and engineering analysis, plus his own work at Thrumster broch and other sites in Caithness, Barber has suggested that, in the north at least, “classic”, “fully-formed” or “tower” brochs such as Mousa may in fact all be of relatively early date and built over a short span of time short duration (“perhaps only a single, say 35 year, generation...in the early fourth century BC”¹¹⁷), often being reduced in height not long after their construction and in some cases incorporated as the cores of more extensive settlements. This latter phase of conversion Barber sees, with many caveats, as being already underway in Caithness by 200 BC and continuing perhaps until AD 200.¹¹⁸

So, while the date of origin for some brochs has been pushed earlier, there remains good evidence that some were still being built around the turn of the millennia in Shetland, and possibly built for the first time then in the west. There is also some evidence which may suggest direct contact with the 1st – 2nd century AD Roman occupying forces in central Scotland on the part of the inhabitants of Leckie in Stirlingshire, one of the “outlying” brochs which have always proved problematic to fit into the mainstream of broch theories. These have tended to be regarded as among the very last brochs to be built, and the broch at Leckie appeared to have been recently built at the time of the suggested Roman contact.¹¹⁹ Edin’s Hall falls into this grouping geographically, but has not so far produced demonstrably Roman artefactual material.

The wide span of dates now available suggests that the narrative which best fits the evidence is that the broch was a successful structural form which was first developed in the north, where it was quickly built in sizeable numbers. Brochs continued to be built in the north in appropriate circumstances over several centuries, and the architectural form was adopted further afield in later centuries. The artefactual evidence from Dun Vulcan does not suggest the Western Isles were colonised in force from the north, being instead more consistent with limited contact. The idea that Shetland may have been taken over by Orcadian broch-builders, as floated by Stewart in 1956, similarly lacks artefactual support. But this returns us to the core of the problem; that we still have next to no excavated evidence for Iron Age culture at the point of broch building, but only from later centuries.

That is probably as much interpretation as the available evidence can currently support, and debate will continue as to exactly what the

¹¹⁷ John Barber pers. comm. August 2018.

¹¹⁸ Barber 2018.

¹¹⁹ MacKie 2007, 1314-5 (See MacKie 2016 for more detailed discussion).

“appropriate circumstances” were which made building a broch a suitable response.

How special are brochs, and what was their purpose?

Many writers, including MacKie¹²⁰ and more recently Barber,¹²¹ have emphasised the combination of architectural features which they felt pointed towards what Barber has termed “canonicity” – the intention of the builders of each broch to conform to a model which was clearly defined closely resembled other such towers so far as geology would allow. MacKie posited a “professional” architect cadre¹²² while Barber has recently pointed to the engineering knowledge involved in constructing so close to the physical limits of buildability.¹²³

Others have seen brochs simply as one end of a much wider spectrum of enclosed drystone structures which were all intended to serve the same broad purpose, presumed to be that of a defensible and impressive dwelling.¹²⁴ Armit developed the idea of the “Simple” and “Complex Atlantic Roundhouses” to emphasise similarities within a larger class of approximately circular structures,¹²⁵ while Romankiewicz has since taken this further to include all thick-walled structures, regardless of plan form, which contained intra-mural spaces and could have been roofed,¹²⁶ though to refer to such a wide range of structures as brochs seems unhelpful.¹²⁷

These contrasting views are interwoven with debate and with assumptions about how brochs “worked” in practical and social terms: about whether they represented the communal homes of whole communities or only of landlords or chieftains; whether they were defensive at all, or solely intended to demonstrate status,¹²⁸ and also about how and when the tower form emerged: possibly early and as a brilliant stroke of creative genius, or possibly late and as the product of a gradual process of experimentation. (Although, as Barber has recently observed, the frequent use of the term “evolution” is inappropriate in a Darwinian sense – ideas may evolve but structures cannot.)¹²⁹

¹²⁰ MacKie 1965.

¹²¹ Barber 2018.

¹²² MacKie 1965.

¹²³ Barber 2018.

¹²⁴ Barrett 1981, 207-17.

¹²⁵ Armit 1991.

¹²⁶ Romankiewicz 2011.

¹²⁷ Romankiewicz 2016.

¹²⁸ Armit 2005b.

¹²⁹ Barber 2018.

Brochs and Iron Age society

A further source of continuing debate has been the nature of contemporary society, ranging from early visions of a near-feudal society with immigrant overlords and their armed warriors living in brochs and levying rent and other support from subservient native, peasant farmers,¹³⁰ through one of embattled local communities seeking to defend themselves against raiders or invaders,¹³¹ to one of peaceable, hierarchical farming communities building brochs not for defence at all, but as a symbol of their possession of the land, their prestige, and safe storage of accumulated wealth in the form of surplus grain.¹³² Several commentators have observed that many brochs occupy locations where large-scale arable agriculture seems unlikely to have been any more viable in the Iron Age than it would be today¹³³ and the assumption of grain surplus is not certain.

Almost all of the dated evidence for life in and around brochs relates to their occupation in primary and subsequent forms, and not to their construction, and this is likely to remain the case. We have no way of knowing whether society at the precise time brochs were built was similar to that in subsequent centuries, from which most of our excavated evidence derives.

The explanation for the regional distribution pattern of brochs probably lies in the nature of Iron Age ‘tribal’ groupings, but there is insufficient evidence to provide a satisfactory explanation. The types of artefact found in broch excavations also occur on non-broch sites and also beyond the so-called “Broch Province”, and brochs do not appear in some adjacent areas where physical conditions suggest they might, for example, in mid and south Argyll or Arran. In short, brochs do not align with a single distinctive “material culture”. Stuart in 1857 expressed things pithily: “there must have been something peculiar in the circumstances of the inhabitants to have given rise to these peculiar erections.”¹³⁴ We are still far from understanding what this peculiarity might have been.

It seems likely that each broch represents the work of a substantial community, larger than a single extended family, which controlled a distinct area of land (and perhaps sea) and that the broch represented a visible token of their possession, willingness to defend that holding, and the social status of the group or at least its leaders. People must also have continued to make their living from the land and sea, so access to resources would have been a constant concern. However, how their society

¹³⁰ Scott 1947, 1948.

¹³¹ O’Neill.

¹³² Hingley 1992, 19; Dockrill 1998, 493-7 et passim; Armit 1996, 129-130.

¹³³ Smith 2014.

¹³⁴ Stuart 1857, 192.

was organised is not self-evident, and the unanswered question remains: what combination of circumstances led to the building of a broch?

So far as can be ascertained from excavated evidence, Iron Age society at the time of the brochs appears to have been relatively “flat”; composed of largely self-sufficient groups, which over time became associated into wider regional groupings that might loosely be termed “chiefdoms”. These various groups doubtless interacted, both productively (trade, social exchange and agreed marriage) and negatively (raiding to steal livestock and perhaps to take prisoners, and even to take over territory). Brochs presumably provided enough defensibility to offer a degree of deterrence against the less desirable forms of interaction which might be expected locally, though they would not have withstood prolonged siege warfare – which in itself says much about how the builders perceived their wider world.

It is possible to imagine economic models for communities living in and around brochs, and while this might have been possible in the more favoured parts of Orkney or Caithness (both of which exported grain in late medieval times), neither the Western Isles or Shetland seem likely to have been able to support a subsistence economy founded principally on the cultivation of grain, though what grain could be produced would have been a valuable resource. Reliance on pastoralism and on the use of coastal and marine resources would have balanced such an economy more broadly, especially if exchange or barter operated between nearby communities with access to different resource bases.¹³⁵

However, the feasibility of theoretical economic models is inter-twined with the particular model of social structure which is assumed. Primitive communalism, client-elite relationships, inter-group collectivities (very close to a chiefdom society), a proto-feudal or even a full-blown feudal system have all been suggested at various times. Each would have made subtly, sometimes radically, different demands upon the resources available. The sole indisputable fact remains that each broch must have been built by a locally-available workforce, sustained by locally-available resources for at least as long as it took to build.

Once built, brochs may well have served a variety of functions, or at least acted as bases for a mix of activities which varied widely from site to site and from time to time. Some brochs went on to become the cores of more extensive settlements, while others seem to have been abandoned not long after they were constructed. Many brochs undoubtedly served as farmhouses in later years, but whether any brochs were built primarily as farmhouses is likely to remain an open question. It is hard to escape the impression, especially when standing next to a broch such as **Mousa** or **Dun Carloway**, that brochs were originally defensive, if only in that they were intended to offer outward vantage, impress the viewer and suggest

¹³⁵ Fojut 1982a.

the invulnerability of their possessors, and that thoughts of agrarian domesticity were not paramount in their builders' minds. On the other hand, the broch at **Edin's Hall** gives much more of an impression of having been influenced by broch architecture but remaining rooted in a different tradition of very large wooden roundhouses – though if Edin's Hall's "broch" was roofed, which has been doubted, it would have been one of the largest roundhouses ever identified in northern Britain.

Conclusion

In conclusion, despite two centuries of study, most of the basic facts about brochs, beyond physical measurements of surviving structures, remain conjectural, with interpretations usually based upon a very small sample of evidence, selectively interpreted, fitted to "off-the-shelf" social models. The revision of explanatory narratives will continue as new evidence emerges and as old evidence is reviewed: every few years brings another brave attempt to present a unified and coherent account of the issues discussed here¹³⁶ only to see each effort, rather than unifying the field of study, simply add fresh fuel to debate.

It remains true, as Stewart sagely remarked in 1956, that "it is easier to guess why the broch came into being than how".¹³⁷ But neither question has yet been answered conclusively.

¹³⁶ Hedges and Bell 1980; Armit 2003 and most recently, Romankiewicz 2016.

¹³⁷ Stewart 1956, 21.