

12 DUN EÒRADAIL

12.1 Physical location and description

Dun Eòradail (NGR: NB 5426 6297, NMRS no. NB56SW 13) is an inter-tidal stack or small island located less than 500m from the Eorodale road end at Ness, and roughly 4km SE of the Butt of Lewis. The coastline is characterised by high cliffs of Lewisian complex anorthosite and metasediments (Burgess & Church 1997, 291). The stack itself is cliff-bound on its eastern, southern and western sides, with a steep rocky promontory running towards Port of Ness to the north. It has a diameter of *c* 200m and is slightly rounded on top. It is covered in grass and has been used to graze sheep until very recently. The grass-covered footings of a number of buildings are visible on the south-eastern edge of the island.

12.2 Erosion

The site and the coastline around it are actively eroding (Burgess & Church 1997, 289). There is evidence of recent rock falls at the landward side of the northern extremity of the site, where the traditional access has been. The erosion of the access route was confirmed by the occupier of the croft adjacent to the site, who informed the project that a substantial amount of rock had fallen off the landward side of the stack within the last 30 years, making access to the stack much more difficult (Calum MacKenzie, Eorodale, pers comm). This erosion potentially threatens part of the enclosure wall (Structure P, below)

12.3 Access (*illus 43*)

The access involved an easy walk through croft land to a rocky beach. It was only possible to reach the base of the island at low tide. A 10m ascent up a near-vertical rock face, using climbing techniques, led to the top. Temporary rock anchors were used to secure the ascent route, while two stakes were fixed on the summit in order to anchor two static ropes for the remainder of the visit.

Due to the tidal restrictions, three members of the team camped on the island for one night so that the survey could be completed. Work on the site was timetabled to fit in with a forecast of a two-day spell of fine weather and suitable tides.

12.4 Previous work

Martin Martin was the first to describe 'Dun-coradil' as a natural fort in 1695. Despite the discrepancy of

name, he was probably referring to Dun Eòradail, as it was clearly a known site when, in the nineteenth century, it was described by the Ordnance Survey in 1852 as 'A small but high island, which is isolated only at high water. There is the site of an old building on its summit, more like the site of a shieling than a castle.' (Ordnance Survey Name Book 1852). In his article on the Duns of the Outer Hebrides, Captain Thomas noted it as 'a small tidal island joined at low water to the main[land] by an Eyrr or Ore, ie beach, and which has apparently been fortified by a wall' (Thomas 1890, 369).

The site was surveyed at a scale of 1:2500 in 1969 by the Ordnance Survey, who identified 'ten small rectangular stone-built huts with rounded corners, now heavily turfed. There are slight traces of a wall along the north-east side of the island but this does not seem to have been defensive, and was probably a turf wall reinforced with stones to keep animals off the cliff' (Ordnance Survey, 18 June 1969). They interpreted the site as a medieval settlement, on the basis of its similarity to Dun Eistean (Barrowman & Driscoll 2000; Barrowman, C S 2001), which lies *c* 2km to the north.

12.5 The survey (*illus 44*)

The surface of the stack was covered in grass that had been grazed in recent years, and was therefore not particularly overgrown.

There were a total of 13 structures, concentrated on the highest area of the island to the north-east. Most of these were small, oval hollows or depressions in the ground, with only the faint traces of walling remaining. The largest structure was a rectangular stone building, which is located in the centre of the island. A stone and turf perimeter wall could be followed around the south, south-east and north sides of the island.

The archaeological remains were clearly visible, but it was often not evident whether the structures were constructed of turf and/or stone. Because many of the structures appeared as hollows or concavities with no clear standing walls, only internal faces were recorded.

Structure A

Structure A was a roughly circular hollow, *c* 5m in diameter, on the south-eastern edge of the island, just beyond the southern end of the perimeter wall (Structure P).

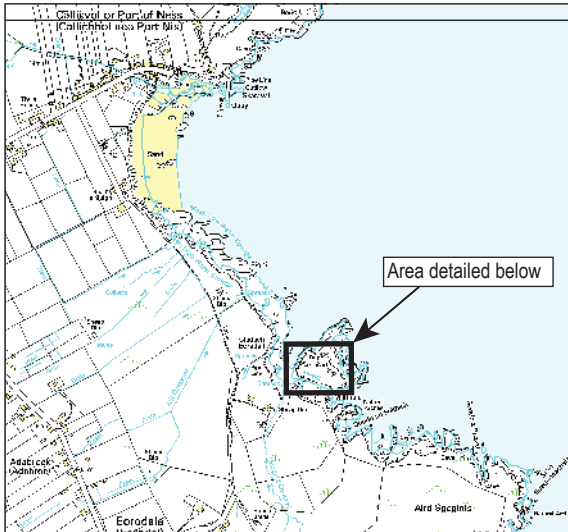
Structure B

Structure B was a rectangular building, 2.5 × 4.5m



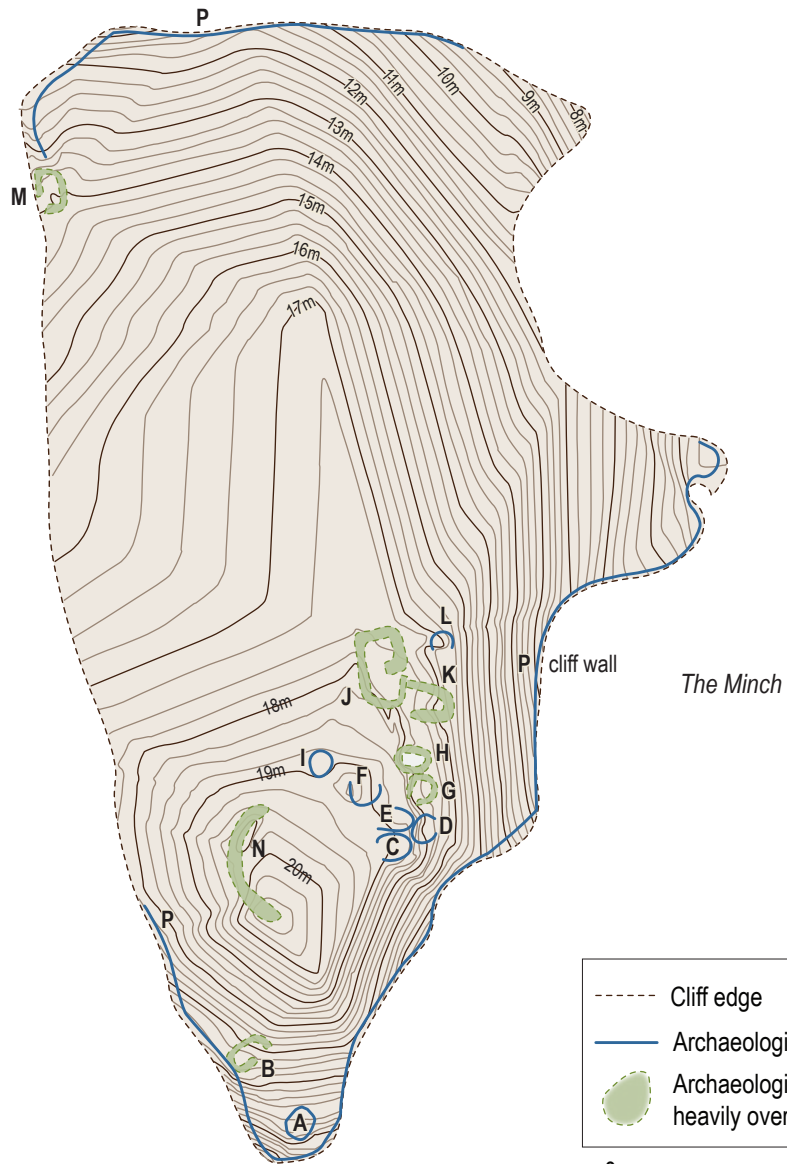
Illus 43 (above) Access to Dun Eòradail from the north

Illus 44 (opposite) Location map and topographic survey of Dun Eòradail



Area detailed below

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KEY

- Cliff edge
- Archaeological structure
- Archaeological structure, heavily overgrown

0 10 m

internally, orientated N/S, built into the southern part of the perimeter wall (Structure P). It had an entrance in its north-eastern corner.

Structure C

Structure C was a small, U-shaped hollow, backed against Structures D and E. It opened to the south-west, and measured 3 × 6m internally.

Structure D

Structure D was a small, U-shaped hollow, abutting Structures C and E. It opened to the north-east and measured 3 × 4m internally.

Structure E

Structure E was a small, U-shaped hollow, abutting structures C and D. It opened to the west, and measured 3 × 3m internally.

Structure F

Structure F was a small, U-shaped hollow, opening to the north, and measuring 3 × 3m internally.

Structure G

Structure G was a circular structure, with an entrance to the south-west. It abutted Structure H, and measured 4 × 4m internally. The floor was lower than the surrounding ground surface, giving an impression of being partly subterranean.

Structure H

Structure H was a sub-rectangular building orientated E/W, without a visible entrance. It adjoined Structure G, and measured 5 × 2.5m internally.

Structure I

Structure I was a very small, circular hollow without a visible entrance. It measured 2 × 2m internally.

Structure J

Structure J was the largest structure on the stack. It was a sub-rectangular building, orientated E/W, and measured 4 × 9m internally, and 7 × 11m externally. On the northern long wall, a small, probably secondary wall, curved south and west to form a small compartment against the inside of the north wall.

Structure K

Structure K was a sub-rectangular building at right-angles to the north-eastern end of Structure J. It measured 3.5 × 6m internally, and may have related to the entrance of Structure J, possibly acting as an annexe. A gap between the north-eastern corner of Structure J and the beginning of the eastern wall of Structure K appears to have formed an entrance, facing east.

Structure L

Structure L was a faint, amorphous, C-shaped hollow, opening to the east. It measured c 3m in diameter.

Structure M

Structure M was a rectangular building, measuring 5 × 3m internally and 6 × 4m externally. It was built into the western perimeter wall (Structure P), away from the other buildings. There appeared to have been an entrance in the south-western corner of the building, but this may have been caused by erosion.

Structure N

Structure N was a very ephemeral, long, curved bank, which formed a shallow C-shape opening to the east. It was c 15m in diameter, and sat on the top of the island. It was possibly natural.

Structure P

Structure P was an intermittent perimeter wall, following the edge of the island around the southern and northern sides, with gaps at the north-east, the north-west, and along the western edge. The eastern and western ends of the northern wall appeared to be real, rather than being caused by erosion. The western end of the southern part of the wall was similar, although this may be due to erosion that also caused the deterioration to the access route.

At the western end of the north wall, a strongly marked in-curve was noticed just above a rock outcrop overhanging a freshwater pool, which is fed by drainage from a small boggy area at the centre of the site.

12.6 Discussion

Little is known about the function or date of this site, even after survey. There is no excavated evidence from it, and no known oral tradition concerning it. The remains, although more ephemeral, are not dissimilar from those on Dun Eistean, as suggested by the Ordnance Survey in the 1960s. The large rectangular building (Structure J), may have been an occupied house of medieval or post-medieval date, with the other forms representing smaller storage huts or earlier buildings. The perimeter wall suggests a defended or enclosed site.

The location of the archaeological features on the east coast of the island, south of Dun Eistean (NGR: NB 5355 6501), and north of the promontory forts of Dun Bhilasleitir (NGR: NB 5602 5762), Dun Othail (NGR: NB 5420 5150) and the stack Caisteal a' Mhorair (NGR: NB 5368 4969) suggests a function in overlooking the seaway of the Minch, which was of so much strategic importance in the Norse and medieval periods. The presence of a managed freshwater source on the island suggests that it could have been occupied for extended periods of time, though the lack of other resources emphasises the dependence of the settlement on its immediate hinterland for support.

Overall the structures are in a relatively stable condition and there is little direct threat to the

buildings from coastal erosion. The only main threat to the site is from the erosion of the access route and

consequently part of the perimeter wall, around the landward edge of the site.