

## Archaeological signatures of landscape and settlement change on the Isle of Harris

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*Abstract - Between 2004 and 2011, a programme of archaeological investigation by the University of Birmingham on the Isle of Harris, a distinctive island forming part of the Western Isles of Scotland, has allowed the archaeological remains of this enigmatic place to be further characterised and understood. Despite intensive archaeological interest in the archipelago for a number of decades, the Isle of Harris has been overlooked and only now are we beginning to identify the archaeological resource and make comparisons to the wealth of published data from islands such as the Uists, Barra and Lewis. This paper highlights some generic overall patterns of archaeological signatures on the Isle which has been identified through a range of archaeological methods including field walking, intrusive excavation, aerial reconnaissance, geophysical and topographical survey, and documentary research. Several key case studies will be introduced including upland shieling complexes and multi-period settlement sites on the west coast machair systems. The purpose of the paper is not to present a gazetteer of the results of the work to date, but to highlight some of the key findings with a view to demonstrating that the Isle of Harris is directly comparable with the archaeologically rich landscapes of the other islands.*

### Background

Over the last three decades, a significant amount of research has been undertaken to advance our understanding of the archaeological remains and settlement history of the islands within the archipelago of the Western Isles of Scotland (for example Armit 1994; 1996, 2006; Parker Pearson *et al* 2004; Branigan 2005; Harding and Dixon 2000; Sharples 2005). Recent work has begun to move towards a more unified study of the Isles looking not only at the less visible monuments, but also at incorporating historic landscape characterisation, geomorphology, sea level change, and palaeoenvironmental archaeology in order to study historic landscapes and the interaction between communities and the places where they live. The result is an array of published material, as well as unpublished archives, which provide insights into patterns of settlement from the Mesolithic onwards

(Bell 2007; Housley and Coles 2004; Rennell 2010). They allow researchers to understand and interpret the complex modern island landscapes, or '*islandscapes*' and the factors which have influenced their development. However, the Isle of Harris which sits in the northern part of the archipelago (Fig. 1) has been relatively neglected. Perhaps due to its lack of visible upstanding remains, or because of its harsh and variable terrain – steep mountains, secluded valleys and deep machair dunes – little research has been undertaken to characterise and interpret the archaeological resource of the Isle; nor has it been possible to define any differences in past settlement patterns and human activity compared to the other Western Isles islands.

In archaeological terms Harris contains evidence for Mesolithic, Neolithic, Iron Age, Viking, Post-Medieval and clearance remains, but monuments and finds have been discovered largely by accident rather than by systematic survey. In 2004, the University of Birmingham began a long-term research project with the aim of characterising the archaeological evidence across a range of the terrain types throughout Harris (Colls and Hunter 2010). A wide variety of non-invasive and intrusive archaeological techniques were applied in an attempt to understand patterns of settlement, to characterise the remarkable adaptability of ancient and post-medieval populations, and to better understand the driving forces behind these adaptations, whether anthropogenic or environmental. This dataset has enhanced the Sites and Monuments Record for Harris considerably; it now allows a much more accurate and balanced archaeological signature to be produced for the Western Isles. This paper will provide a summary of the main factors which have influenced and impacted upon the development of the present Harris landscape and introduces several themes and case studies (both invasive and non-invasive) from fieldwork. Individual site reports and comprehensive data analysis will be reported on elsewhere.

Harris lies towards the northern end of the Western Isles, an archipelago of approximately 500 islands off the west coast of Scotland covering 2900km<sup>2</sup> (Fettes *et al.* 1992). Although not an island in its own right, Harris, with the adjoining Lewis, forms the largest island of the chain (Fig. 1). The geology, topography, geomorphology, and climate of Harris and the other Western Isles have greatly influenced the types of settlement and agriculture that can be

developed there. Steep hills and valleys dominate the Harris landscape, particularly in North Harris which contains more land over 400m above sea level than the rest of the Western Isles put together. Although the geology of the Western Isles is dominated by the Lewisian Gneiss Complex, a series of Pre-Cambrian, metamorphic rocks, which are some of the oldest in the UK (Collins 1986; Fettes *et al.* 1992), the geological signature of Harris, more specifically South Harris, is much more complex than its neighbours (Goodenough and Merritt 2007). Bands of younger rock formations, including granite, steatite and gabbro are present and work is currently ongoing to compare settlement patterns and the location of archaeological monuments with the complex geology of South Harris.

As with other parts of the Western Isles islands, geomorphological characteristics are perhaps even more influential on settlement patterns. Three key characteristics of the Harris landscape which combine past and present are peat deposition, machair formation, and sea level change. Predominant in the uplands and mountains of Harris, blanket peat has buried much of the landscape to varying depths between 0.3 and 1.2m. By the end of the Bronze Age, the peat coverage of the Western Isles was probably as extensive as it is today. Along the west coast of Harris, blown sand (commonly referred to machair) has had a similar obscuring effect, but has the advantage of being dynamic rather than static. Rising sea levels throughout the Holocene controlled the onshore movements of vast quantities of sediment from the extensive and shallow coastal shelf, which in turn formed the machair dune system (Wickham-Jones and Dawson 2006). Jordan (2004) has outlined that mid-late Holocene sea level change (based on sites on Harris and Lewis) can be summarised into two major 'events' between 5500 $\pm$ 60 years BP and 4500 $\pm$ 100 years BP and between 3000 $\pm$ 80 years BP and 820 $\pm$ 50 years BP. With the west coast of Harris being predominantly fertile machair plain, this highlights the likelihood that many of the coastal settlement sites of the Mesolithic onwards may now be submerged below the Atlantic seaboard. The absence of machair sand from deposits underlying the earliest known site on Harris (Mesolithic middens at Taobh a Tuath; RCAHMS Canmore ID 10502) suggests this site predates machair formation (Simpson 1965; Simpson *et al* 2006) as do the earlier Neolithic settlements at Coileagan an Udal, North Uist (Evans 1971, 52-62).

## **Cultural Impacts on the landscape**

Cultural impacts on the present landscape have been equally significant. On Harris, two in particular stand out, partly through scale of impact and partly through strength of historical record. Both lie outside what might have been viewed as 'traditional' archaeology 20 years ago, but both are critical in understanding the present and historic landscape: the clearances of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the subsequent increased development of the fishing industry. Fishing had already been established in the eastern parts of Harris towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a commercial initiative undertaken by the current owner of the island, Alexander MacLeod. This attracted an increased population from both Harris and elsewhere in Scotland to the eastern villages (known as the Bays) where the land was mostly too rocky to cultivate. Elsewhere the traditional farming soils on the machair to the west remained the island's main livelihood and focus of population. However, from the later 18<sup>th</sup> century landowners throughout Scotland were beginning to recognise that sheep were a far better source of revenue than the relatively small and unpredictable rents provided by farming tenants. The result was a wholesale clearance of crofters from traditional fertile areas of settlement to make way for the sheep. This entailed destruction of dwellings, many being dismantled to provide stone for sheep walling, and a fundamental change of boundaries, field systems and settlement patterns. So severe was this that the pre-clearance landscape was virtually obliterated. The only structures likely to have survived were those of value to the sheep farmers, such as the excavated building at Borve (below). Apart from those, only slight traces of the earlier landscape now remain within the modern field systems (Figure 2). In human terms the 'clearances' as they were termed entailed an enforced move of families from the western machair and from fertile islands such as Pabbay, to seek a subsistence from fishing in the east, notably on the island of Scalpay. This created unprecedented population centres in areas hitherto rejected throughout prehistory and the Middle Ages. It was a reluctant move for most, and for many emigration to the New World was seen as a better alternative. One key reflection of the resulting population pressure and shortage of land can still be seen in the numerous 'lazy beds' created on every available slope and patch of land irrespective of soil quality (Figure 3).

These fundamental social changes are barely evident in the census returns. From 1801 – 1951 the returns for Harris show a population fluctuating between c.3000-5500 souls (the present population is now barely 2000), but this disguises emigrants from clearances, internal migration from the fertile west to the inhospitable east, and incomers to the fishing from outside the island. It also disguises the effects of kelping which was underway before the clearances occurred. Kelp collection was already attested in the 1792 *Account* which describes how seaweed was carried from the shore and used to manure cultivated land (OSA 59f). Later, kelp was being collected in order to be burned to produce alkali for glass manufacture. This did much to remove manpower away from farming and fishing to the long-term detriment of both. Kelp burning was arguably as close as Harris ever came to the industrial revolution, but the price of kelp fell dramatically in the earlier 19th century and never recovered. By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century the machair on the west coast of Harris, traditionally home to farming communities from prehistory onwards, appears to have been populated by sheep rather than people and the character of the earlier landscape all but obliterated. It never regained its former population status, the commercial fishing eventually failed, and in the process the slowly evolving cultural landscape of Harris became completely remoulded.

One example of this can be seen in the ruins of deserted settlements, particularly in the coastal inlets to the east. Agricultural remains, in the shape of boundaries, drainage and soil preparation/management, and sites associated with the exploitation of the sea, form an important component of the archaeological record to survive and yet these categories of evidence seem to be the least studied. The remains of stone jetties, fish traps and house foundations around the inlets and natural harbours attest to the development of those areas since the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. For example, at the small community at Miabhaig situated within the East Bays (Fig. 1), over 50 fishing related sites are still visible today along the shore. Mostly seen at low tide, these weed covered jetties, slipways and traps are inextricably linked to the ruined houses and structures located just a few meters from the shore (Figs. 4 and 5). The small communities along these shores thrived and struggled as the fishing industry and crofting, and the relationship between the two, developed.

## **Shielings**

In common with other farmers practising a mixed economy in the Scottish highlands, those on Harris traditionally utilised the upper pastures in the summer months. In Scotland this process of transhumance which involved moving the sheep and cattle to higher slopes in order to optimise on the new summer grazing stems from Norse times, in places continued through into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is well documented (Bil 1968). Settlements were effectively divided into two parts: the main household or farmstead on the lower ground where cultivation took place, and the rougher buildings known as shielings on the upper slopes which acted as temporary shelters for the shepherds (often girls from the village), storehouses and working areas during the summer months. These buildings were usually of drystone construction, sometimes part-corbelled in bee-hive shapes and often occurred in clusters giving the impression of small nucleated settlements. Some of them may even have taken on a more permanent status as a result of population pressures after the clearances (above). The same buildings were re-used annually, presumably being cleared out with any necessary restoration being undertaken at the beginning of each new season. The longevity of individual shielings remains conjectural. Very few have ever been excavated but, by virtue of their locations along remoter valley sides, many have survived redevelopment, robbing and the ravages of curious tourists and may conceivably be many centuries old. Several are perfectly preserved and still roofed such as two examples set high up the steep northern slopes of Vigadale on the border with Lewis (Fig. 6). One of these measures approximately 2.5 x 2m with rounded corners and with the upper courses gradually indenting to create convex roof, now grass covered. It has a low entrance c. 0.7m high and four storage niches set into the inside face of the walls. The majority, however, survive only as grass-covered shells. Those on Harris tend to have in common a bright green swathe of grass around the outside, presumably testifying to the disposal of generations of domestic waste and organic activity.

Field survey in Harris has now identified and recorded a number of clusters of shielings, mostly located in the mountains of North Harris where they tend to occur on the valley sides, sometimes positioned high up in order to provide vantage points over the flocks. Their precise locations may have been determined by the easy availability of building stone,

either from natural geological resources and scree, or from previous shielings or even earlier collapsed archaeological remains. One typical cluster of structures, also on Vigadale, covers an area of c. 70 x 50m, and probably contains at least 10-12 overgrown structures (Fig. 7). There are remains of at least three or four grass covered foundations terraced down-slope to the east, remains of possibly three or four further grass covered structures terraced on the higher slopes to the south-west, together with two better-defined upstanding remains. One of these measures c. 5 x 3m with drystone walls c. 1m wide surviving to height of c. 0.75m with a slight annex off to south and which appears to be constructed from earlier curved(?) structure using larger stones. The other, a small stone-sided feature c. 2 x 2m was constructed of drystone walls c. 0.5m wide surviving to height of 0.5m with possible entrance to the south-west. Nearby parts of a large glacial erratic rock has been adapted by crude drystone walling into covered chambers or rooms with lines of drystone walling. One measuring some 4 x 3 x 0.75m, located at the north side, effectively forming a type of cave under the rock overhang with a narrow entrance to north. Most of structures of this type still lie unrecorded, undated and largely unrecognised for their social and historical significance.

### **The machair**

Much of the impetus of the fieldwork was directed toward the machair on the western coast of South Harris, notably at Nisabost and Borve (Fig. 1). The findings confirm the machair to be one of the key archaeological areas on Harris. Although many of the placenames are of Norse origin, the presence of the Neolithic standing stone known as Clach Mhic\_Leoid (MacLeod's Stone; Canmore ID 10532) and two chambered tombs point to a much older archaeological legacy. With the sea on three sides, the imposing peninsula at Nisabost consists of an upper terrace, where the MacLeod Stone is located, and a steeply sloping southern face leading to a very large area of undulating machair dunes (Figures 8 and 9). A number of archaeological sites were identified on both the upper and lower levels of the peninsula which included visible earthworks and enclosure systems, eroding middens, structural remains and spot finds (Canmore IDs 10528, 10529, 10533, 10536, 10537, 269182, 305970) . The area is prone to erosion damage caused by a combination of livestock, wind and tidal actions. Given the richness of the archaeological remains beneath

the machair dunes throughout the other islands, this area was selected for an intensive programme of fieldwork to assess the date and character of any buried remains and to provide patterns of settlement for comparison with other machair sites along the Hebridean Atlantic coastline. In 2005, after intensive and systematic field recording, a number of geophysical surveys (resistivity and magnetometry) were undertaken across the Aird Nisabost peninsula; all of which identified the presence of significant anomalies which were interpreted as archaeological in origin (Fig. 10).

On the high ground, field recording proved successful in further characterising substantial enclosure systems in Areas 1 and 2 (Canmore ID 10537). These areas were investigated further by geophysical survey. In Area 1, an area covering approximately 6,500 square meters is enclosed by two parallel ditches with internal stone and earthen bank (standing to a height of 0.5m). Geophysical survey identified a possible structure in the western corner of the enclosure as well as internal divisions (Fig. 11). Similar square and rectangular enclosure systems were identified along the eastern section of Aird Nisabost (Area 2), although here the earthen banks are better preserved, surviving to a height of approximately 1m (Figure 12).

Further, more intensive, fieldwork has been completed on the low lying machair dune systems covering the southern area of Aird Nisabost (Area 3). Already noted for the number of prehistoric and Norse find spots which have been recorded throughout the last century, and the volume of possible sites recorded during fieldwalking in 2004 and 2005, this area has great potential to further our understanding of ancient machair settlements on Harris and to provide us with a comparable dataset for other islands. An area totalling 15,200 square meters, which included mounded dunes of varying sizes and the flat areas in between, was surveyed with a range of geophysical equipment. Many anomalies were identified including linear and discrete features across the survey area. In addition, a topographic survey of the dune system was completed using differential GPS, and the subsequent digital terrain model was used as base heights for the geophysical survey (Fig. 13).



Resulting from the geophysics, and still in progress, is a programme of archaeological excavations at Aird Nisabost, Area 3. A series of small test pits, located to test the results of the geophysical surveys, were excavated in 2006 which revealed a complex array of stone structures which represents significant and important remains of human occupation in association with artefacts dating to the Iron Age and Norse periods. Between 2009 and 2011 a substantial excavation of one settlement mound was completed resulting in the identification of a Late Iron Age/ Pictish building containing three separate elements (Structures 1 – 3; Figs. 14 to 17).

Structure 1 is circular in plan with a diameter of c. 4.8m and standing in part to a maximum height of c.1.3m (Fig. 15). The local geology on Harris does not lend itself readily to the production of laminar building materials. Although many of the walling stones were appropriately faced, those on the uppermost courses were much cruder and presumably reflect a lower need for structural stability against the eaves. Construction was by an inner single face of stones packed against the sand. It was of part-corbelled character, although it was not clear whether the internal batter of the stones was a deliberate corbelling effect or a result of the pressure of sand from the outside. Inconsistency of the batter suggested the latter. Sections cut through the walling in two places illustrated the absence of any backing material (e.g. turf) and it was assumed that the structure had been cut into an existing machair dune. The basal courses had been constructed directly on to sand and no foundations were evident. No obvious post supports were identified, although two possible contenders (F209 and F210) were positioned at the edge of the walling. Their shallow profile suggests that, if anything, they are more likely to represent post-pad impressions.

Exposure and part excavation of the building in its entirety was able to demonstrate that the circular walling (F106) was not of a single phase; evidence of likely blockings and rebuilding could be interpreted in at least two places (F202; F203). These may have been necessitated by change of use or by collapse, the latter being evident at the north-west and possibly being the cause of abandonment. There were two existing openings in the walling circuit, one to the north-east (c. 0.6m wide) and one to the south-east (c.0.5m wide) marked by a kerb and staining from a threshold stone (F211). It seems likely from a topographic point of

view that the north-east opening may have led directly outside while the latter provided access into Structure 2. The possible blocking F202 may originally have led through into Structure 3 to the south, and F203 to a further (undefined) structure to the west. Structure 1 was clearly not an isolated unit, but part of a larger complex of units which together held some form of social or functional integrity.

Internally, excavation was undertaken down to what was interpreted as the floor surface. This consisted of a compacted mix of clay, charcoal and burning and was exposed in all but the north-west quadrant which was not excavated further. A hearth (F204; Fig. 16) was located slightly off-centre to the structure. This was formed by three kerb stones, measured c. 0.6 x 0.4m, and was open to the east. It contained a heavily compacted burnt fill resting on a pad of bright red clay. There was a further hearth-like, but less formal feature (F205) located against the wall at the east. This was sub-circular, approximately 0.4m in diameter and was surrounded by, and infilled with, small cracked burnt stones.

The south and south-west of the circuit was characterised by wall 'units' consisting of a possible cupboard or enclosed area (F206) and the remains of a stone sided tank with luting of grey clay (F207). An orthostat located to the west also seems to have been a component of this group providing a total enclosed area of some 3 x 1m. A further stone-sided unit (F208) was located against the north wall. This measured c.1.5 x 0.6m. All the various elements had been established directly into sand. Their use is unclear and excavation revealed little evidence of a base or flooring within them. A cube-shaped, heavily used smoothing stone was recovered from the sand fill of F206; this may have been fallen from a ledge in the wall. A further smoothing stone was located elsewhere in the building, and these two objects provide the only clues as to the structure's function. The excavation of F208 at the north produced a hammer stone, three small fragments of pottery dated to the Late Iron Age and a small fragment of a copper alloy object. The remarkable paucity of both pottery and animal bone throughout the excavation of the structure strongly suggests that the building was unlikely to have been 'domestic' (i.e. living quarters). Nor did it contain remains or residues from 'industrial' processes such as metalworking, bone working, potting or tanning (malodorous residues). The activities undertaken required some form of heat and

perhaps storage – possibly for skins or wools rather than for grain or produce – for which the luted watertight tank (F207) appears to be focal.

The fill of Structure 1 was almost entirely of aeolian sand, but with some stabilisation lines and dark root horizons. There was some charcoal, patches of shell midden and animal bone, as well as pieces of antler in the upper fills. The contouring of the sand infill gives some idea as to the nature of abandonment. The collapse at the north-west side was never repaired and sand appears to have blown in from the west. It accumulated within the eastern side of the structure and became sufficiently stable for a thin soil horizon to have developed on its surface and across the former working floor. This horizon effectively provided a stratigraphic marker, and a seal over the internal features. Repeated sand and stabilisation events subsequently filled in the structure completely.

Structure 2 was probably a later addition accessed through the passageway c 2m in length leading from Structure 1 (Fig. 17). The passage widened out (a later event?) and the walling was somewhat cruder in construction. The primary surviving element of Structure 2 consisted of a curved wall line (F112) constructed of thick upright slabs resting against a sand backing reminiscent of Pictish period structures at Bornais, South Uist. However, this had been later superimposed by slabbed upper coursing as part of a modification. F112 was of varying thickness, c 0.7 – 1.2m, poorly stone-faced on either side.

The fill of the structure was largely aeolian sand with stabilising layers and root horizons. At the entrance was a thin dark stain lying parallel to the likely position of the door, possibly representing a dust line for the door, or even the rotting door itself. There was also a hinge socket of soft degraded quartz. This was the only part of the floor surface that seemed to have survived. The depth from the current ground surface to the floor was c 0.5m. A sherd of coarse pottery was recovered adjacent to the socket (context 117).

Structure 3 appeared to have been inserted in through the south outer face of Structure 1, and consisted of the curved end of a further cell (Fig. 18). The walls were crudely constructed, but seemed to be concave in profile, similar to those of corn dryers from

elsewhere. Again the fill was of aeolian sand, but with root horizons and darker lenses. Although excavated to a similar depth to Structure 1 no floor level was identified.

The few pieces of pottery recovered would appear to belong to the later part of the Iron Age. The character of Structure 1 and the complex of cellular structures to which it appears to be integral is strongly indicative of the post-broch period, for example similar to the structural complexes at Pool, Sanday (Canmore 3422), and Buckquoy in Orkney (Hunter 2007; Ritchie 1977; Canmore ID 1799) and Bostadh in Lewis (Neighbour and Burgess 1996; Canmore ID 4130). In Structure 2, the wall line constructed of thick upright slabs resting against a sand backing is reminiscent of the post-wheelhouse structure at Cnip, Lewis (Armit 1996, 165; Canmore ID 4009).

The site at Borge lies within the west-facing dune system in the south of Harris on the fringes of the machair (Fig. 1). The site was first recognised through field walking as the probable remains of a stone structure eroding from the sides and base of a large dune. Reference to the natural section of the dune itself indicated at least three former ground surfaces above the exposed stones emphasising the constant process of topographic change. There is little known archaeological or historical background to the area, although the name itself may derive from ON *borg* (fort) and lies within a concentration of other Norse names. The landscape was cleared in the middle part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to make way for sheep; most of the stone structures were dismantled to provide field walls. Excavation took place in 2005 and 2006 and involved the partial excavation of a multi-phase stone structure measuring at its largest stage of development some 10 x 5.5m (Fig. 19). Although it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from the scale of excavations undertaken certain clear observations can be made.

The stone structure excavated was not primary to the site. It had been preceded by an earlier post-hole building of unknown date (Phase 1; Fig. 20) and the construction of a clay floor (Phase 2). These were only partially excavated, but the presence of a stone saddle quern of prehistoric type (Fig. 21) together with a possible broken megalith reused within

the walling of the later building and/or its local context suggested that that the site may have been of long duration.

The stone building itself appears to have been of three phases: a primary kiln unit (ostensibly for drying grain; Phase 3), followed by the addition of a larger cell to the south-east (Phase 4; Fig 22). Although the structural elements were on a similar alignment there were clear differences in the quality and method of construction. The kiln structure was substantially double-faced and mortared, while the added cell was mostly single-faced, partly mortared and revetted into waste from the kiln. The kiln itself consisted of a bowl-shaped feature with a maximum diameter of c. 1.5m surviving to a maximum of twelve courses held together with a greenish grey clay mortar. At the base, was a rectangular flue opening supported by a flat lintel block within the main wall.

At some point following the layout of these cells, the entire structure was revetted on all sides, initially by an earthen bank and then with a low, poorly consolidated kerb wall (Phase 5). A second adjoining structure was built to the south of the first building, seemingly connected at its eastern extent (Phase 6). The nature of this adjoining structure is unclear without excavations within its interior. However, the construction of the wall suggests that it may have acted as an enclosure rather than as a second building of the same constructional quality as that to the north. Over time a series of deposits were dumped against the south-east exterior wall of the main northern structure. The evidence for burning within these deposits suggests that they may have been associated with some form of 'industrial' activity, possibly metal-working.

Although the excavations have clarified certain features of the site, they have also raised numerous unanswered questions. The phasing of the site needs far more clarification, as does our understanding of the actual function of the complex. The stone kiln in the northern cell is of appropriate type to have been used for grain drying but other interpretations, such as distilling, are also feasible. Moreover, if the southern cell/area was used for metal-working then was this activity concurrent with the grain drying? If so then the site appears to have been dedicated to a variety of relatively large-scale industries and thus raises

various questions regarding the nature of the products, the intended market, and the extent of local settlement infrastructure. A series of notable, if minor, earthworks down the slope to the west of the site suggest extensive archaeological remains, although the nature of these features is yet to be clarified.

Perhaps equally importantly, the site also still remains largely undated, at least to within a narrow time-frame. The crofts around Borve were abandoned in the 19th century as part of the clearances and no oral history records an industrial complex on the site following this event (G. MacLeod *pers comm.*); nor is there evidence for settlement on 1st edition Ordnance Survey maps. The style and construction of the structure suggest a medieval or early post-medieval date, based on comparative architectural analysis. In support of this, the pottery from within the building could date from anytime between the 14th to 18th centuries (Mary MacLeod *pers comm.*) although these finds were mainly from post-abandonment deposits. However, the recovery of uncontexted Iron Age pottery from a stratified context outside the main structure indicates prehistoric activity in the area. Likewise, the broken megalith (?) within the constructional material of the wall separating the two main cells could plausibly relate to the re-use of a Neolithic/Bronze Age standing stone and may hint at a far longer site history.

## **Rodel**

One further site deserves mention here, the area around Rodel at southern tip of the island (Fig. 1); this has the benefits of a natural harbour (since improved) and is located favourably for sea routes to other parts of the Western Isles and across the Minch to Skye. It offers the additional benefits of a sheltered valley containing rich, reddish soils more fertile than elsewhere on the island. Not surprisingly, the immediate area contains a wealth of concentrated archaeological remains consisting not only of Iron Age fortifications overlooking the harbour approaches -Loch an Duin (RCAHMS 1928, no. 121) and Dun Stuidt (RCAHMS 1928, no. 122), a possible monastery, and the only (late) medieval church standing in the Western Isles, but also a plethora of boundary features of different character dating from prehistoric to clearance times. There is no doubt that Rodel was strategic in the medieval shipping lanes of the western seaboard; as a result of this it was also likely to have

been a place of status, now reflected in the impressive stone church of St Clement located on a headland overlooking the harbour and constructed by Alexander MacLeod of Dunvegan and Harris (also known as Alasdair Crotach) around 1520 (RCAHMS 1928, no.111). Given the quality of the land and setting, there can be a reasonable assumption that settlement continuity continued from prehistory throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. At the time of the clearances which at Rodel occurred in the earlier part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, '150 hearths' were recorded by the Highlands and Islands Commission (cited in Lawson 2002, 71) indicating a significant level of population.

During field walking in 2004 an area of crofting land at the bottom of the valley immediately north of the church was interpreted as containing possible house platforms on the basis of topographical expressions (Fig. 23). It was anticipated that these might relate to medieval or post-medieval settlement in the vicinity. The field containing these remains lay adjacent to a byre converted from an 18<sup>th</sup> century building (now listed: HB Number 12908) and clearly originally of some importance. Some 30 broadly rectangular individual units were identified in total. A small number contained clear evidence for stonework, but the majority appeared to be turf-based. In an attempt to clarify this geophysical survey was undertaken (resistivity) but was unable to delineate the turf-based features further. It did, however, identify a likely trackway running through the 'structures' (Fig. 23).

On the basis of topographic and limited geophysical evidence, four trenches were established in order to test the nature of the remains. Trench A was used to bisect the walling of a probable blackhouse depicted on the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of OS 6-inch map (1881), and the other three (Trenches B, C and D) were positioned to test turf-based features (Fig. 23). The probable blackhouse was estimated to be of dimensions 12 x 7m and this is towards the smaller end of the scale for blackhouse sizes; Fenton places the length range between 9.14 and 18.3m (1978). In Trench A an initial area of 4 x 0.75m was opened to bisect the wall and include part of the internal floor; it was later extended to 4 x 1.14m to take into account a blocking feature in the walling which prevented the true nature of walling construction to be observed. Once exposed, the wall itself was shown to be double-faced, approximately 1.5m wide, and suffering from considerable rubble collapse on both faces (Fig. 24). The

faces were uncoursed and their unevenness reflected the poor quality of local stone for building purposes. The whole wall was sunk into natural clay and facilitated a slightly lower floor on the interior – a characteristic of blackhouses (Walker and McGregor 1996). The fill between the faces was of compacted soil and small stones and contained a significant quantity of animal bone and artefactual material, including pottery, glass and a small cannon ball.

Trench B measured 3 x 0.75m and revealed what appeared to be the sporadic remains of two rough stone walls, but further investigation and a trench extension failed to confirm this. The stone elements appeared to be geological, and the absence of any domestic detritus (animal bone, pottery sherds etc.) suggested that the area had not been inhabited. Trenches C and D demonstrated much the same. Trench C measured 3 x 1m and was positioned over a specific linear resistivity anomaly. On excavation this transpired to be the gully from a ridge and furrow system. Trench D was located the higher ground away from the other trenches and measured 3.2 x 1.2m. Like Trench B, putative walling transpired to be geological outcropping and no positive evidence for structural remains was discovered.

In many senses the results were disappointing in that the ‘lost’ medieval settlement at Rodel was not identified. However, the topographic turf features investigated were clearly of anthropogenic origin and seem to have incorporated natural geological features; they perhaps related to cultivation or agricultural practices. More optimistically, the finds from the stone structure supported an 18th or 19th century date appropriate for a blackhouse. Two fragments of medieval pottery were also recovered; these at least testify to a medieval presence in the area.

## **Conclusion**

Research on Harris has now demonstrated the survival of significant archaeological deposits dating from prehistory through to the 20th century. Their previous invisibility has been partly a consequence of submergence under sand and peat, and partly due to the extreme effects of the 19th century clearances in moulding the landscape. It may also be argued that the intensive research over the last 50 years on the other Hebridean islands succeeded in



highlighting the profile of archaeology in these areas, but of course this scenario never really developed to such an extent on Harris. Detailed fieldwork as part of this continuing project, both non-invasive and invasive, has demonstrated that the level of monument survival is no less than that on other parts of the archipelago; in fact, given the range of landforms that Harris offers, the diversity of monuments is arguably greater than elsewhere. The survival of shielings is a case in point, as is the presence of the fishing landscape on the eastern coast and the unique status area within the rich soils around Rodel; the machair, as on Lewis and the Uists, conceals a rich and remarkably intact settlement heritage from prehistoric times. This new knowledge is the product of systematic seasonal survey and exploratory excavation spread across seven years. Without it Harris would still remain an almost blank and barren area on the archaeological map of Scotland.

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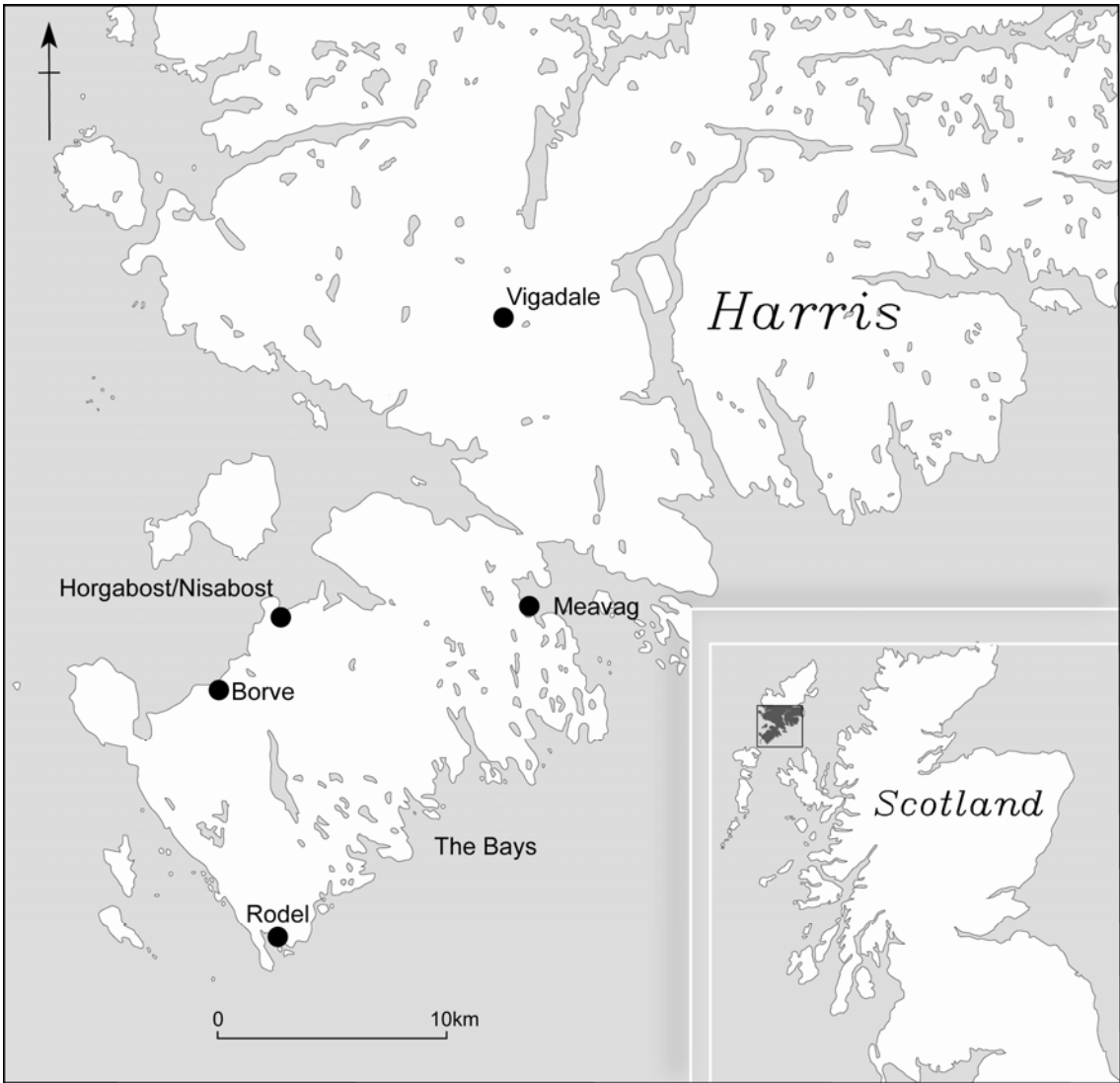


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

Figure 4





Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



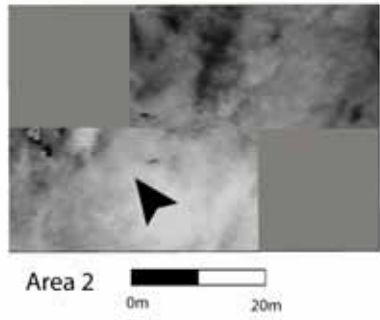
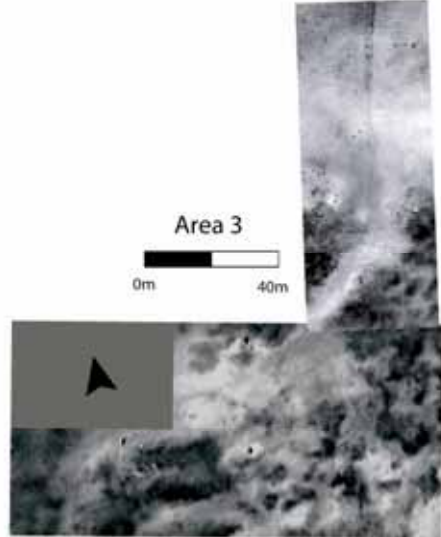
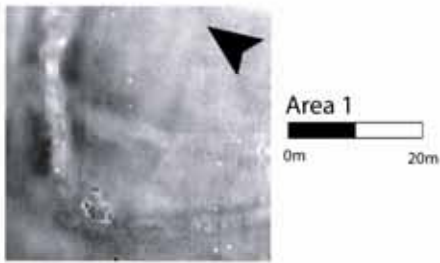
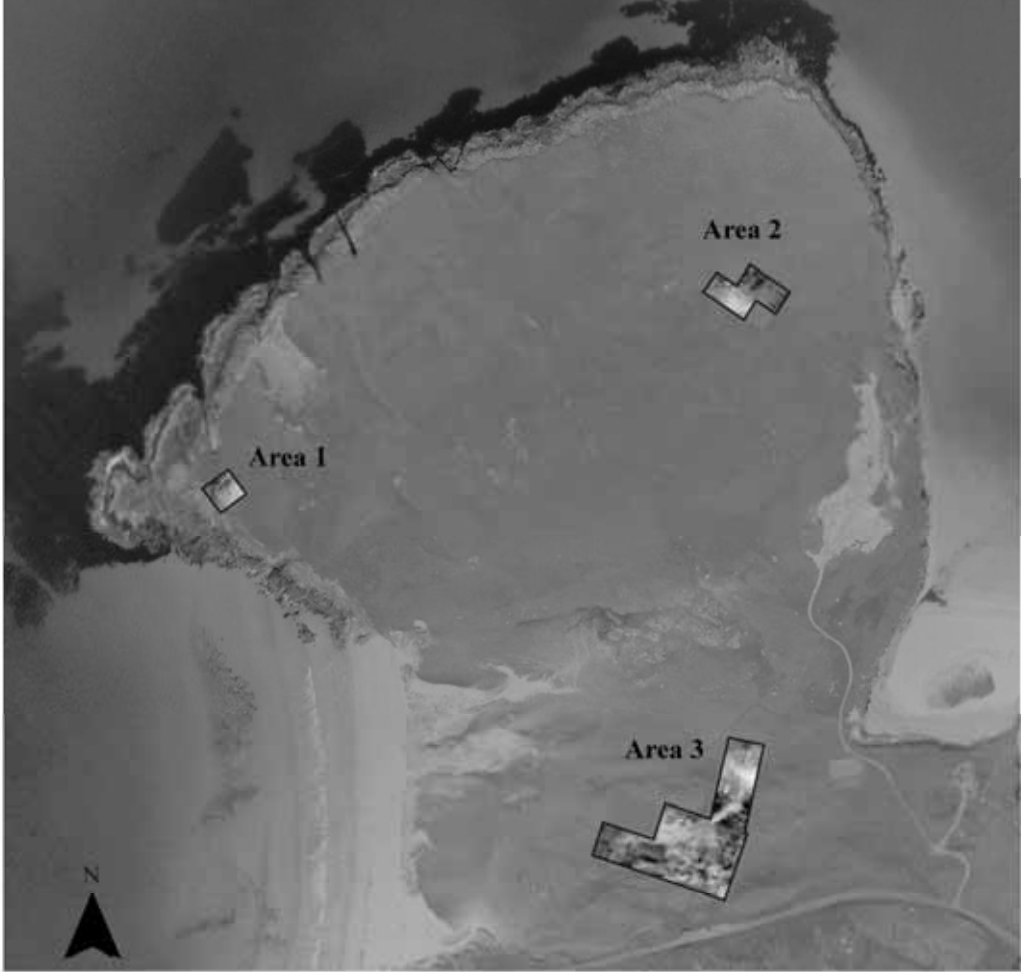


Figure 10

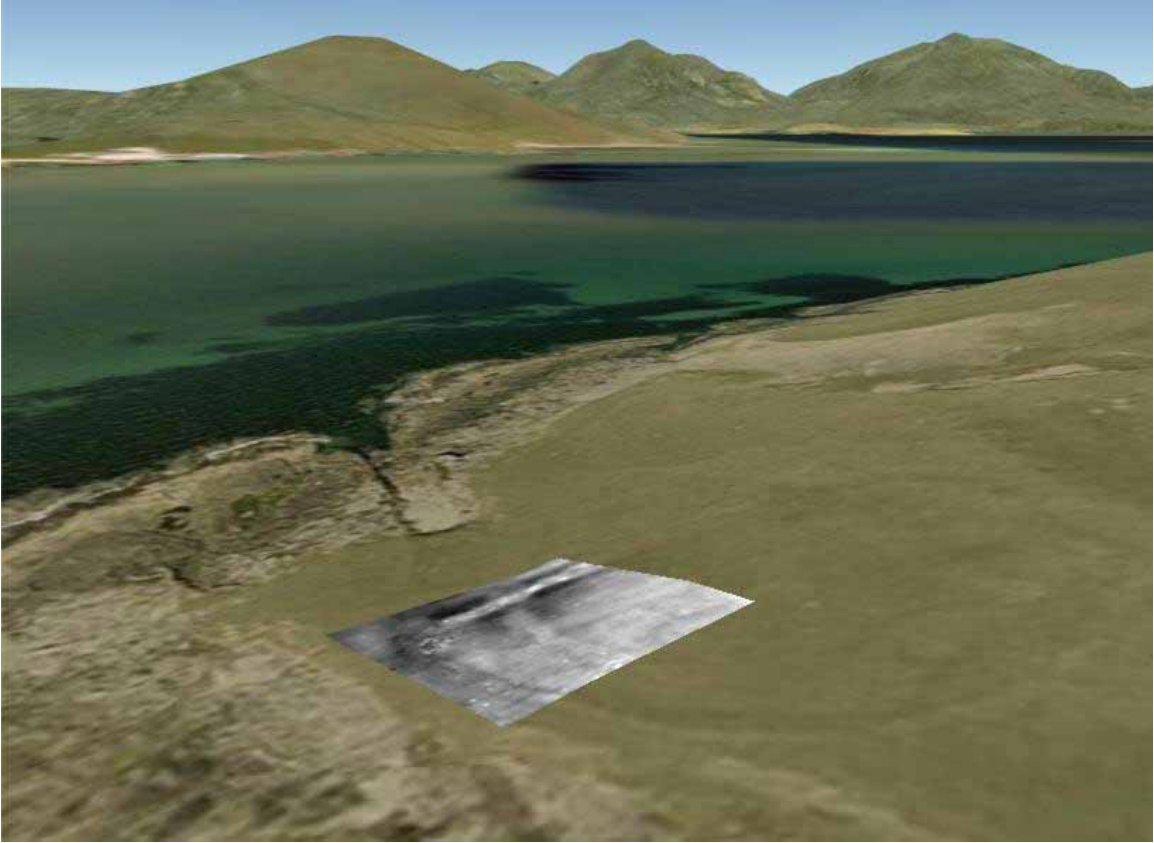


Figure 11



Figure 12

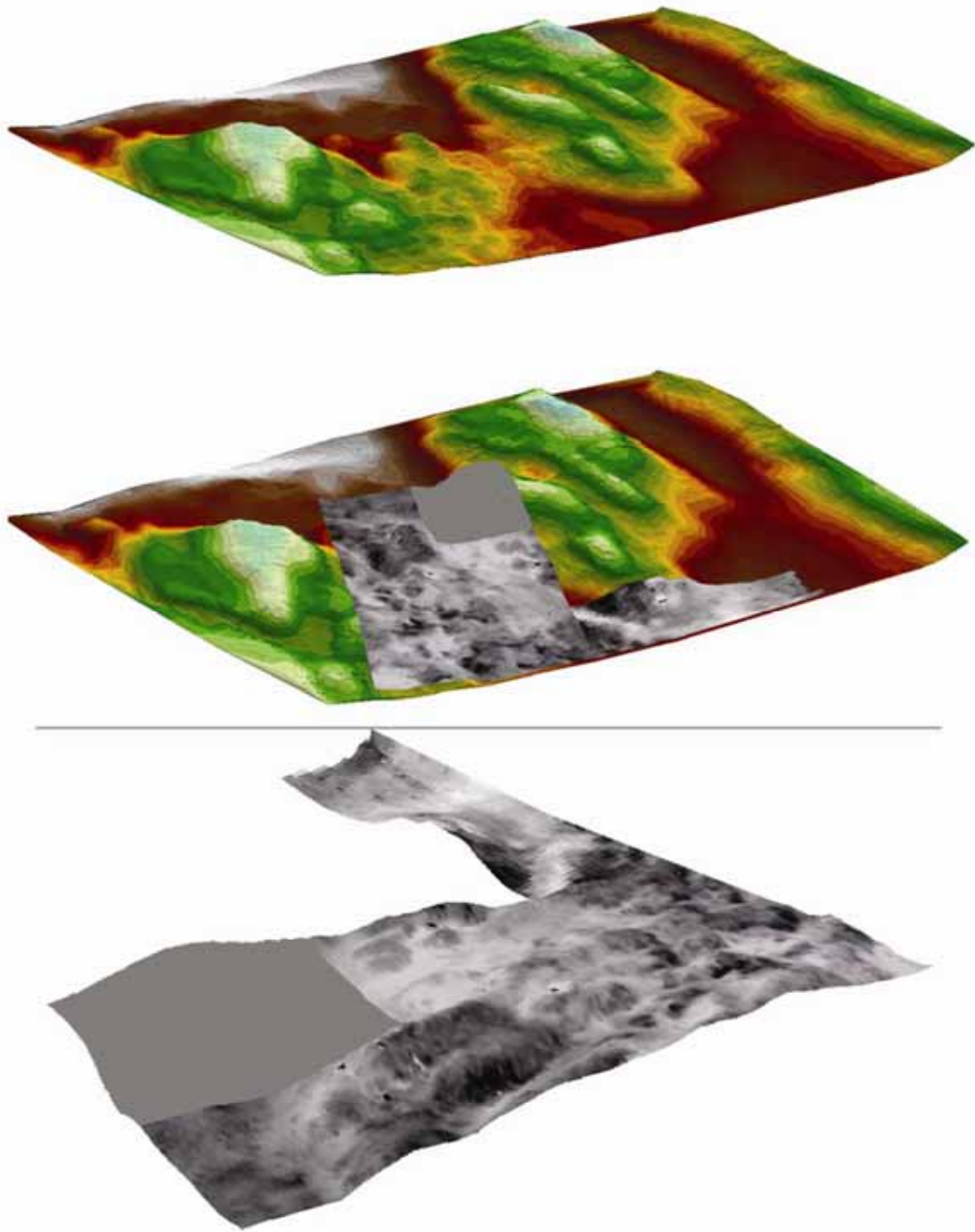


Figure 13

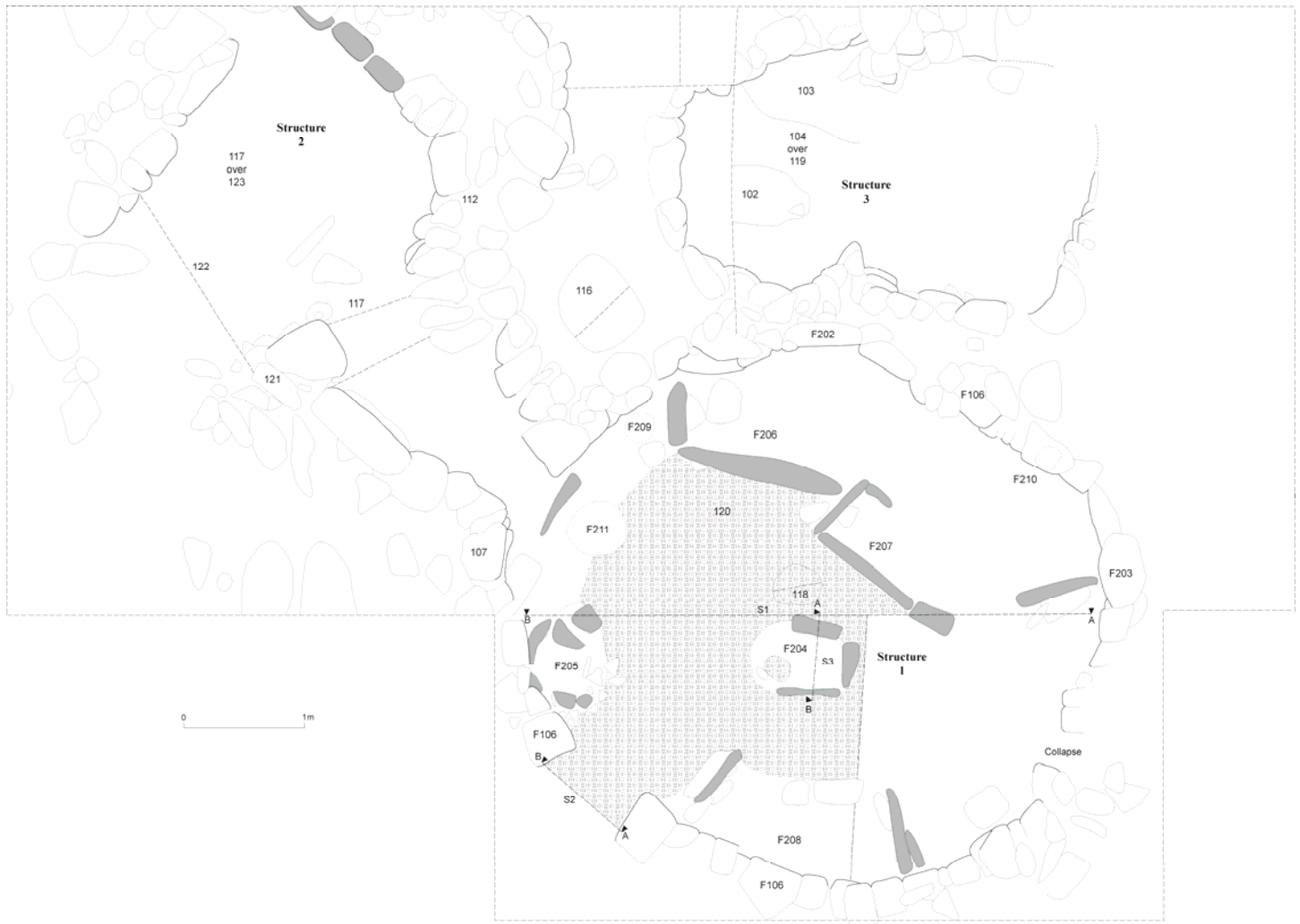


Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21

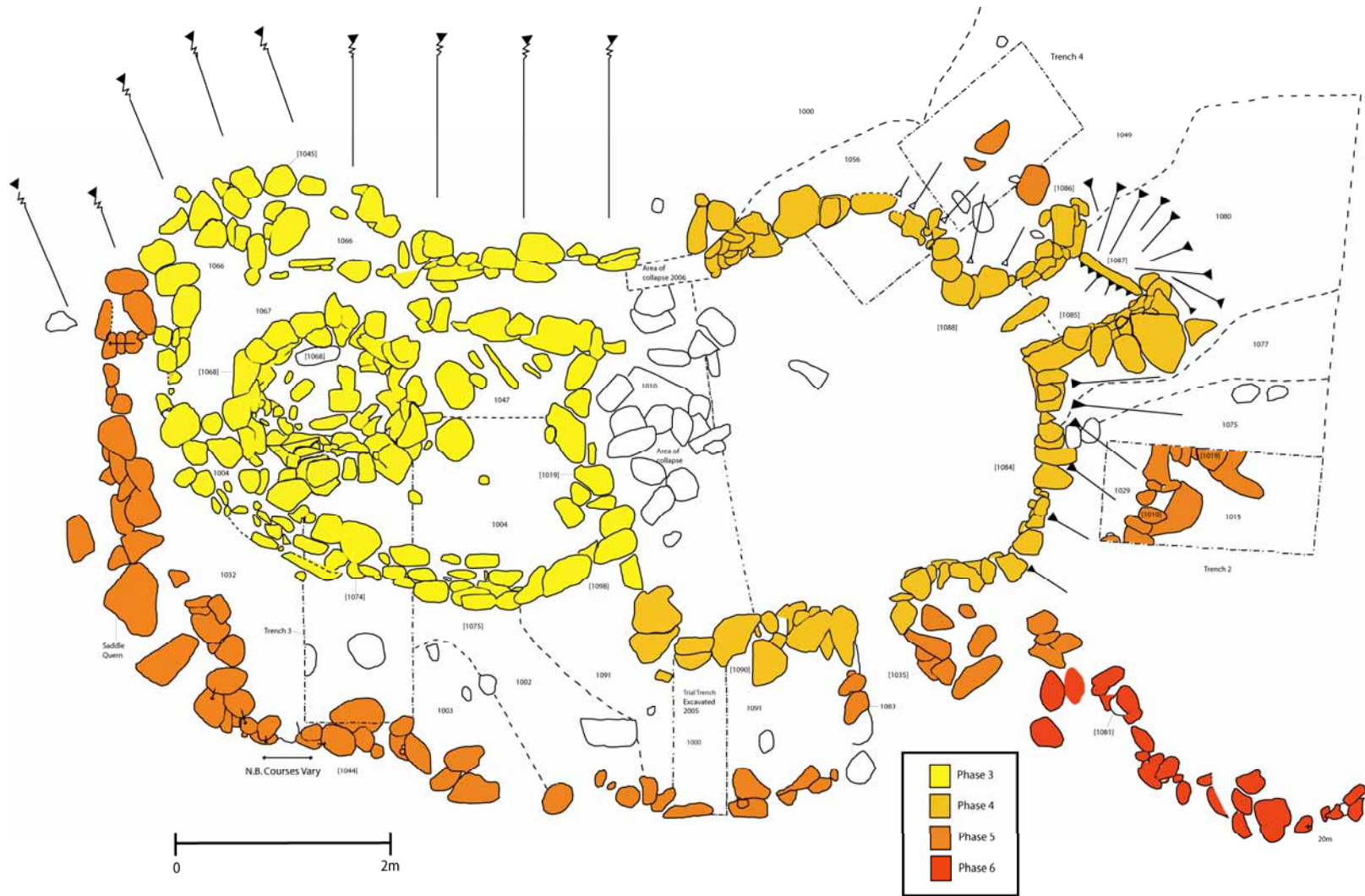


Figure 22



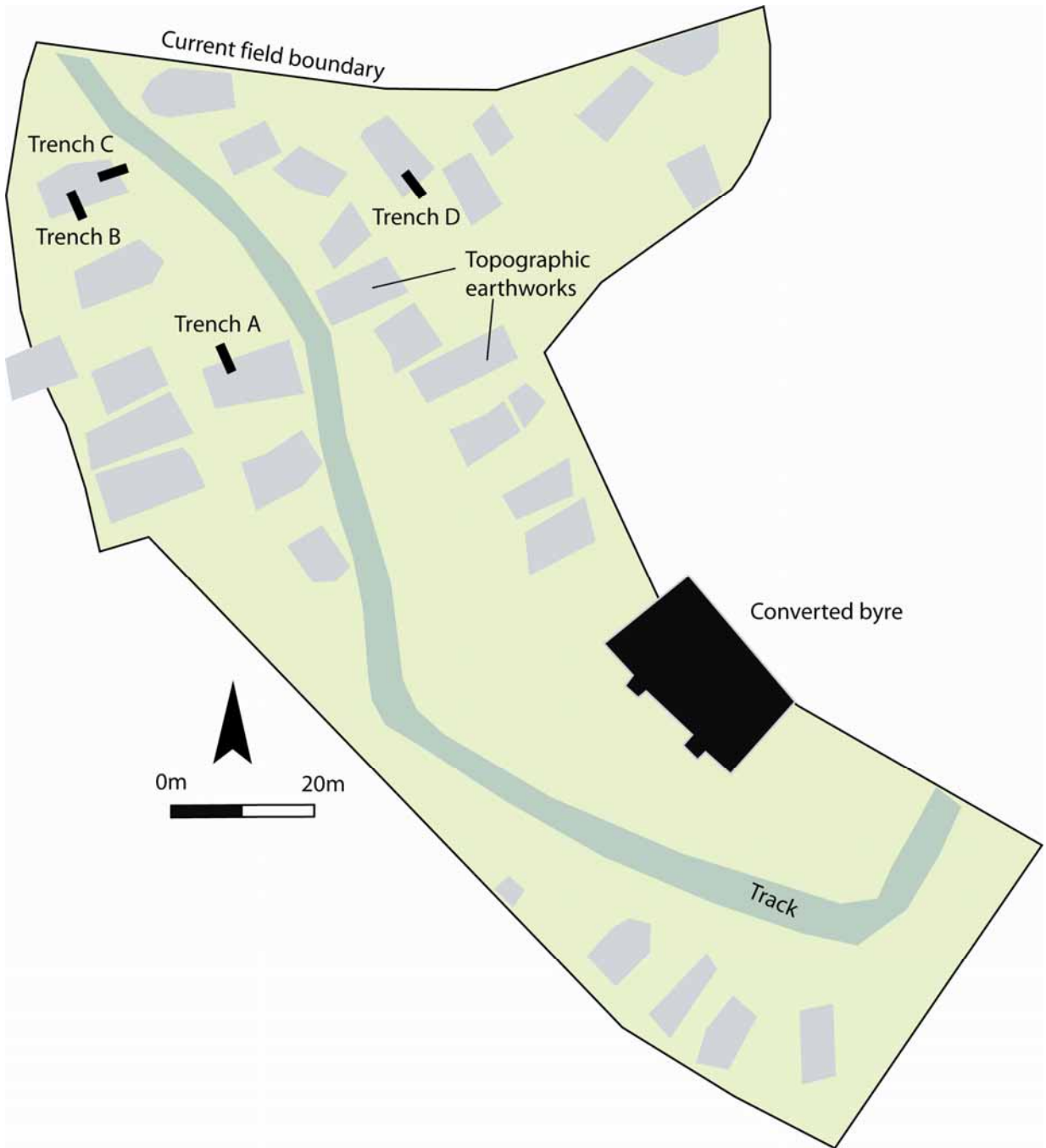


Figure 23



Figure 24