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FINLAGGAN, ISLAY – THE CENTRE OF THE LORDSHIP OF THE ISLES  
EXCAVATIONS AND FIELDWORK 1989 – 1998

PART 6 – INTERIM REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS ON EILEAN MOR

THE KITCHENS AND HOUSES BY THE JETTY

TRENCHES 12, 2 AND 4



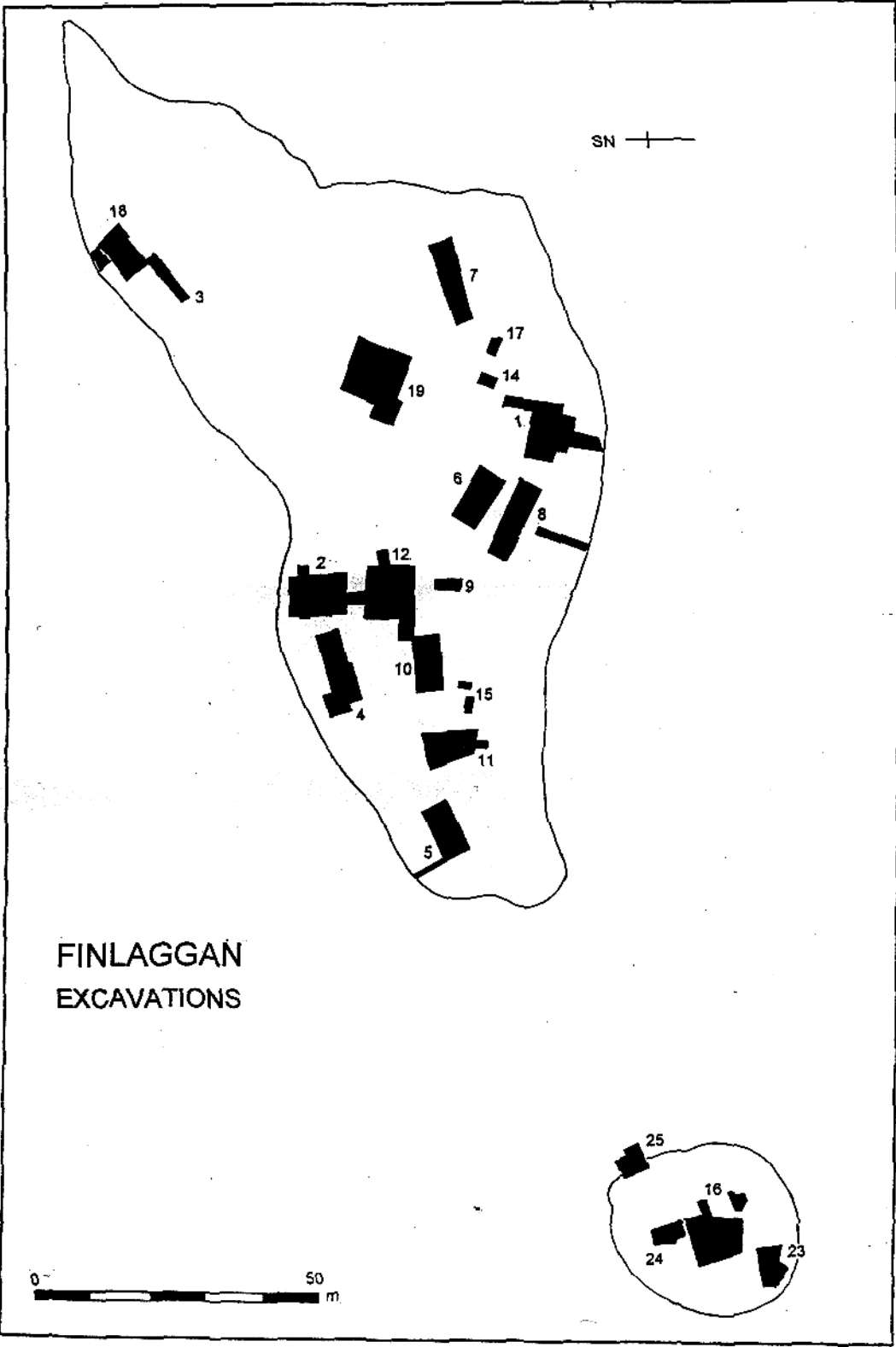
Eilean Mor, trench 4

DIRECTED BY DAVID H CALDWELL

ON BEHALF OF NATIONAL MUSEUMS SCOTLAND

*PRE-PUBLICATION TEXT – SUBJECT TO CHANGE; FULL TEXT NOT AVAILABLE*

*Up-dated 21 November 2010*



FINLAGGAN  
EXCAVATIONS

[NB The text and illustrations in this part of the report are derived from the interim report]

## TRENCH 12

Although most of the main area of Eilean Mor is very busy with buildings, even to them having being placed right at the water's edge, there appeared to be an open, rectangular space bounded by the hall, structures K, Y and F. It was proposed in 1992 that a trench should be positioned to check if there was a courtyard or garden here.

Excavation in 1992 of trench 12, then 2 by 10m, running approximately E-W in the area to the E of the great hall and S of building K, led to the then surprising conclusion that this part of Eilean Mor had been built up in the Medieval Period, with a sequence of houses, of which five were tentatively identified in three phases. We were aware that the limited area of the trench was hardly sufficient to resolve and characterise a complex stratigraphic sequence and it therefore seemed appropriate to extend the area of trench 12 for excavation in 1993. This was done in such a way that the new trench was linked to trenches 10 and 2 to provide direct stratigraphical relationships.

The new trench was about 10 by 8m and oriented with its longer side E-W and all but the eastern 3m of the 1992 trench running across the middle of it. From the N edge a 2m wide strip extended 4m to within the area of the 1991 trench 2 and another 2.5 by 3.5m extension connected with the NE corner of the 1992 trench 10.

It now appears that the level, empty appearance of the central area of Eilean Mor, bounded by the hall, and buildings K, Y1 and F, is due to its cultivation as a garden after the demise of the medieval buildings. This would explain the development of a peaty soil [12002] under the turf and the poor survival of the walls immediately underneath. In so far as the cultivation of this plot resulted in the removal of most of the stonework of one building [12.1] but left its E wall [12021] just outside the cultivated area it led the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland to misinterpret the latter wall as the edge of a fictitious enclosure Y1.

This garden soil sealed the remains of two sequences of buildings on two plots separated by an alley. We will describe the sequence in each plot in turn, starting with the one further to the east. Here the uppermost building [12.1] has stone walls 0.8m wide. A spread of gritty, yellow sand [12003] over the remains of its E wall [12021] may be evidence for decayed lime mortar. The building is 7.8m wide but its



Trench 12 plan 1.

length could not be determined since its S wall was outwith the trench. Its entrance is in its W wall, off a paved alley way [12157]. In the interior there are remains of an earth floor [12014] with a central, paved, hearth [12007]. There were also fragments of roof slate.

Building 12.2 lies under 12.1. Its E and W side walls are just within those of 12.1, giving it a maximum width of 3.6m, and it is positioned further to the N so that its length was verifiable as 8m. Its side walls are noticeably convex, giving it a barrel-shaped outline. The walls consist of an alignment of stones, some orthostatic.

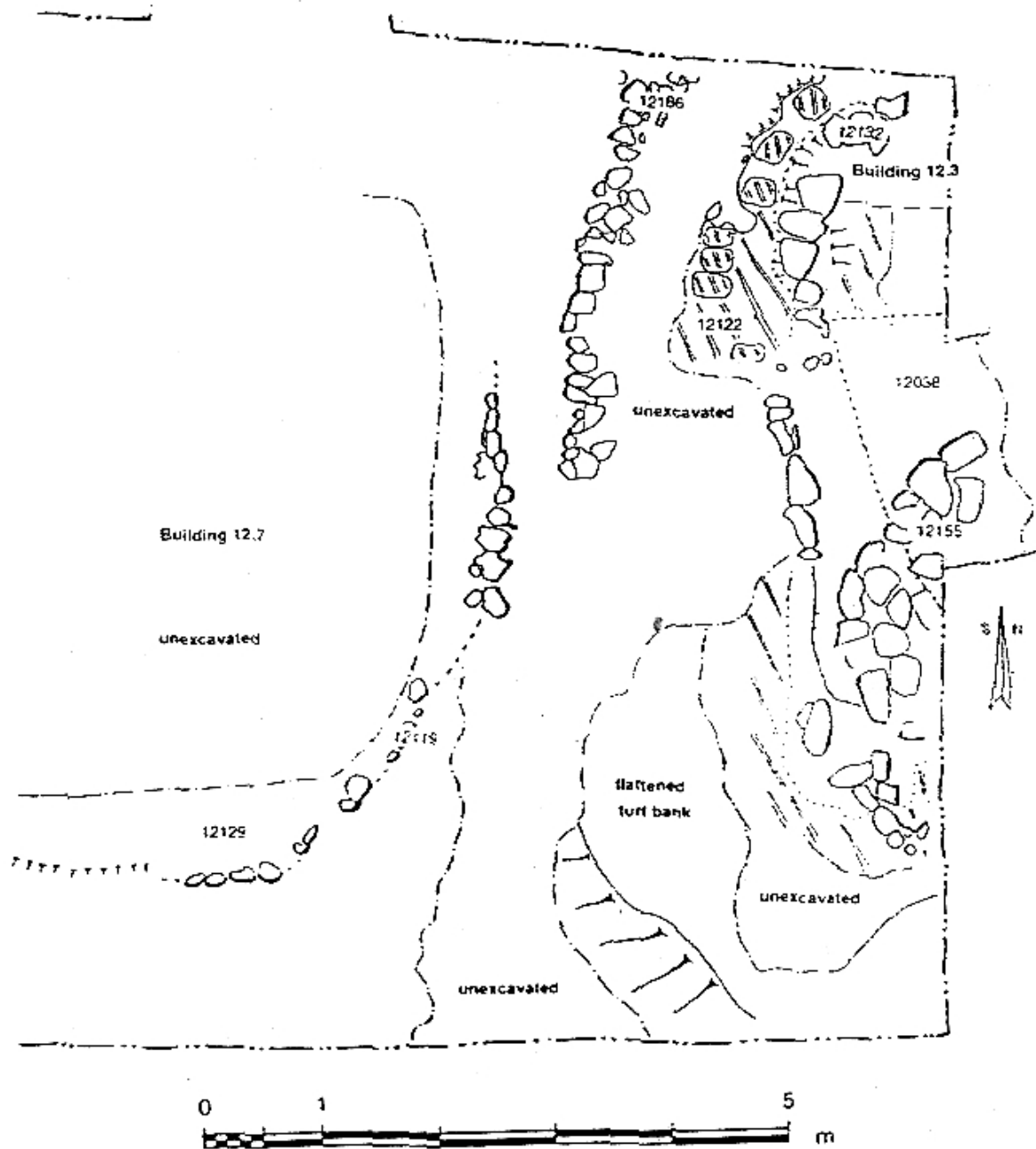
Within this alignment are other stones which define the positions where timber uprights have stood. At the two external corners - NW and SW - within the trench there are stone pads for other timbers. The entrance is in the middle of the W wall and is approached by the paved alley way 12158. There is no obvious floor deposit to be associated with building 12.2. The interior area has make up [12015, 12124] for the floor of 12.1 which gives on to debris and collapsed material [12023, 12141, 12142] from building 12.3. The explanation for this would seem to be that building 12.2 had a sprung timber floor, as is hypothesised for building V excavated in trench 7.



Trench 12 plan 2.

The walls of 12.2 are set in the crest of banks which represent the remains of two earlier structures, 12.3 and 12.4. Building 12.3 consists of the flattened remains of turf banks [12122, 12140, 12025, 12054] defining a sub-rectangular or oval building, the S end of which is within that of 12.2, and its N end outwith the trench. The banks have been reveted inside and out with dry-stone walling, some of which

remains [12132, 12186]. There is an earth floor with a substantial central hearth [12155].



Trench 12 plan 3.

Building 12.4 lies under 12.3 and is a structure of similar construction. Its W wall is slightly further W and it extends further S. It has a central, probably rectangular, hearth [12038], of pink sandstone, 60mm thick, set in a layer of pale grey-green sand [12041]. The sandstone is so badly heat affected that it has almost totally disintegrated.

There are other occupation deposits in this area of trench 12, only sampled within the confines of the 1992 trench. A layer 60mm thick of black silt impregnated with charcoal and pieces of carbonised wood [12044] gives on to other silty deposits, some with charcoal. Natural sands and gravels [12185] were reached at a level of about 52.82m.

In the plot to the W of the alley way there is a sequence of at least three buildings, one on top of the other. The uppermost, building 12.5, is a rectangular structure, 8.8m N-S over walls about 1m thick. Its E-W dimension is probably about 6m. These walls are of stone with an earth or turf core, constructed over the stubs of the walls of an earlier structure [12.6]. They may never have risen to full height, functioning as a support for a timber superstructure. The floor is of earth [12188, 12199] and the paved entrance [12144] was located in the E wall, off the alley [12157]. Its use seems to have been broadly contemporary with building 12.1.

Building 12.5 was a replacement for a house [12.6] with clay-bonded stone walls 0.8m thick, the bottommost courses of which are incorporated in its walls. Its doorway was located in the same position and it was probably in use about the same time as building 12.2. A vertical slot, 240 wide by 120mm deep, mid way along the interior face of the S wall, is interpreted as evidence for a roof supported on crucks. Several fragments of roof slates were found in collapsed material [12149] from the destruction or demolition of this structure.

NB handmade vessel 12H – several sherds from floor [12130 and others in topsoil 12101 – see shed map on Dawson's report

Much of the floor area of building 12.6 is taken up with the ruins of an oven which was presumably for preparing food for use in the neighbouring great hall. The oven is constructed of yellow clay with stone facings. It is 2.8m in diameter with a stone paved chamber 1m across. Much of the working surface roundabout consists of trampled rake-out [12173, 12110] from its operation. A sample from 12173 gave an archaeomagnetic date of 1425-75 or an age centred on 1290 (per GeoQuest Associates). The former range is preferred on stratigraphic grounds.

The oven is surrounded by a system of drains. At the back (N) of it a drain [12109], covered with roof slates, runs E-W (the direction of flow was not established), and possibly through the doorway. It is joined by another drain [12176] which cuts through the S wall of the building and flows around the E side of the oven, and part



of another [12172], which may have gone round the oven's W side, was exposed in the S of the trench. Neither of these drains has capping **in situ**. This elaborate attention to drainage may reflect problems with a rising water level in the loch.

The S and E walls of building 12.6 appear to be set over the flattened walls of an earlier oval or sub-rectangular house with broad, stone clad, turf walls [12119, 12129]. The W extension of the trench located a stretch of the paved road [12136, 10028] running along the E side of the phase II great hall. It is founded on a rubble bank [12191] which may be part of the support [10045] for the phase I E wall uncovered in trench 10.

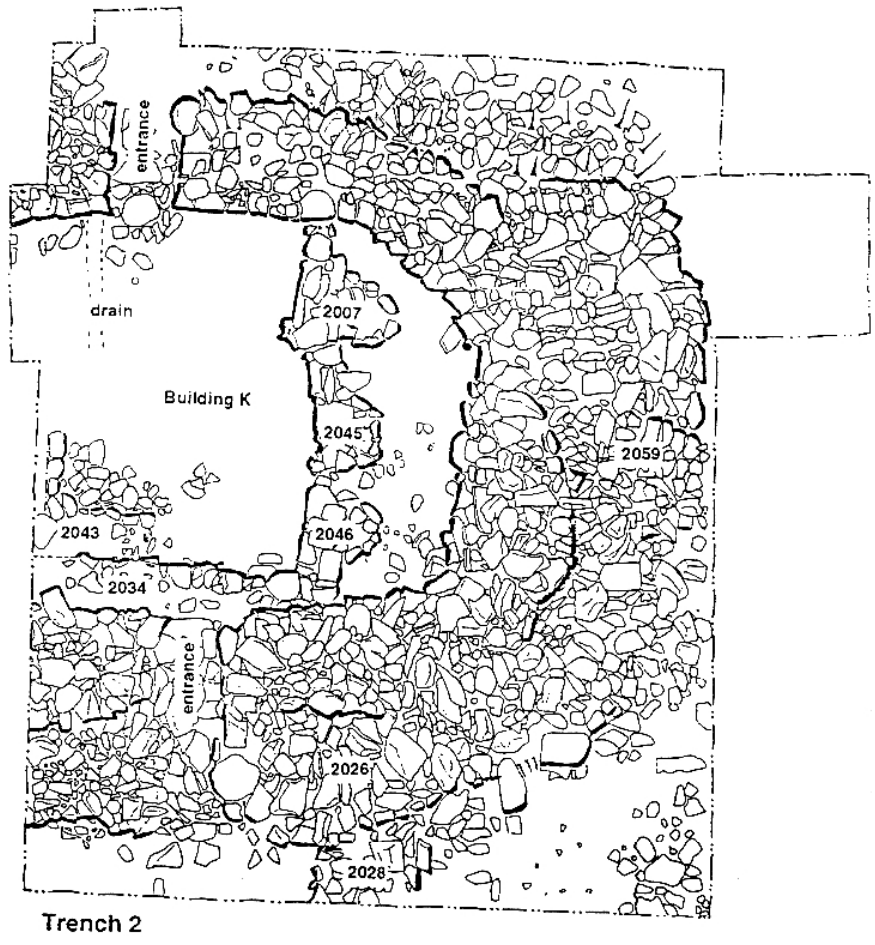
In the N extension of trench 12 a patch of stone [12192] was encountered, part of wall 2028 encountered in trench 2. Wall 12192/2028 may be part of a multi-room building 12.6.

## TRENCHES 2 AND 4

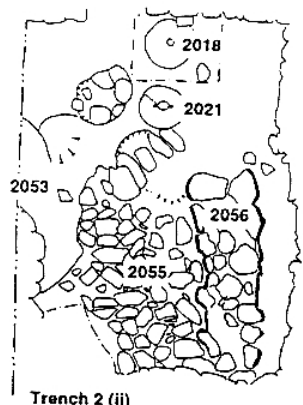
These two trenches were placed to sample two sub-rectangular structures on the north edge of Eilean Mor. These were the ruins of dry stone buildings, one at right angles to the other, building L (12 x 5m) apparently containing two rooms, and building K (11.9 x 7m). It was assumed that these formed a unit dating to the Post-Medieval Period.

In 1990 trench 2, 10m long by 2m, wide was positioned to go over the end wall of structure K and just to clip one of the long walls internally. A small extension was later dug laterally to take in the entrance. It was hoped only to assess the complexity of construction and hopefully collect some dating evidence, but the results were so promising that an enlarged version of trench 2 was excavated the following year. It measured 8 by 10m and took in the east end of building K. Trench 4 was laid out nearby, an irregular area 14.5m long and 4 to 6.5m wide, including the SW corner of K, part of building L and paved roadways to the W of L.

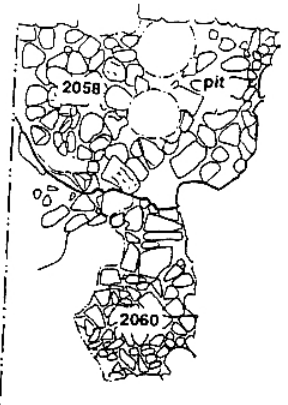
Building K is of dry-stone construction, 11.9 by 7m with rounded corners. Its external walls are about 1.5m thick and are composed of a mixture of boulders and cut blocks of local stone types (limestone, phyllite, Port Askaig boulder bed, etc) laid in courses. They survive to a maximum height of three courses, about 0.5m above the internal floor surface, but in so far as the interior of the building and the



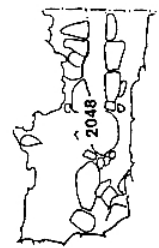
Trench 2



Trench 2 (ii)

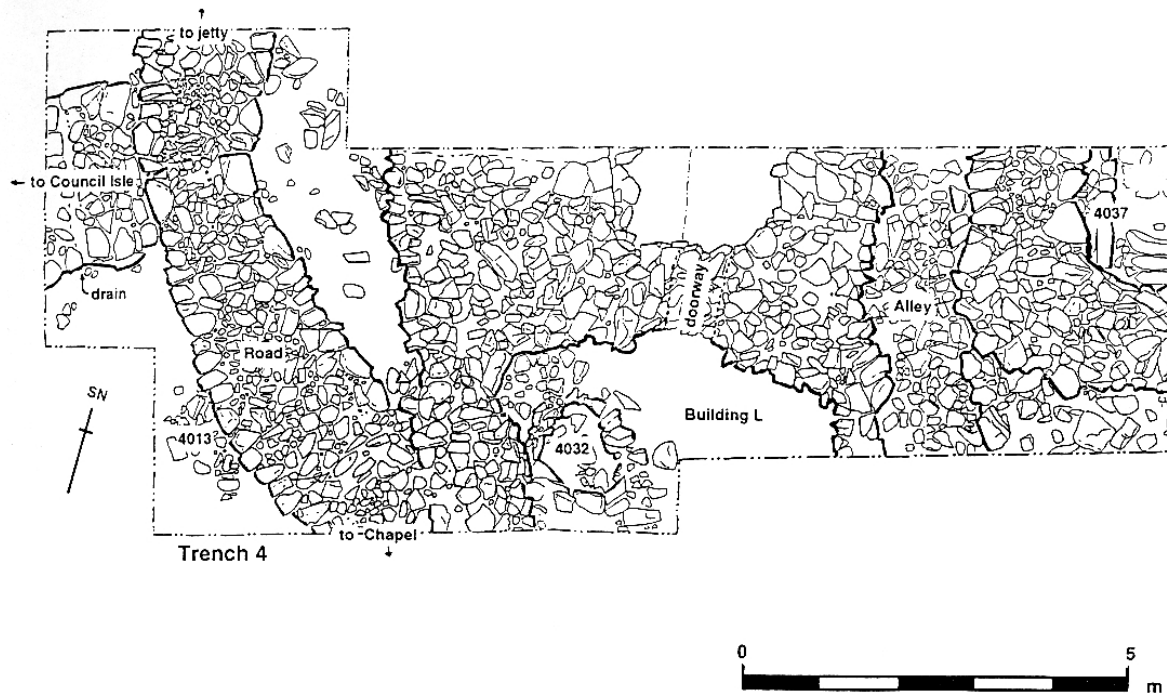


Trench 2 (iii)



Trench 2 plans.

immediately adjacent area are encumbered with tumbled stones must have stood rather higher when the structure was in use. The north wall [2004] is a survival from an earlier structure (K.1). Two entrances were identified, one in the long north wall 0.8m wide and another in the south wall 1.0m, but not exactly opposite each other. The floor [2033] consists of trampled earth, and there is a circular stone hearth [2036/2041] in the centre. Dating evidence may be provided by a base sherd (SF 2047) provisionally identified as Saintonge polychrome (SW French). It is of 16th-century date.



Trench 4 plan.

Building K is separated from building L by a narrow alley with crude cobbling [4039]. Structure L is ovoid rather than rectangular in shape and it is unicameral. The supposed S room is the end of an earlier structure (L.1). Building L's entrance is outwith the area of trench 4 but can be traced midway in the W wall.

The building is of dry-stone construction, with rounded boulders and rough blocks up to about half a metre across, mostly quartzite and some glacial erratics. The walls do not survive to the same height as those of building K and there was less evidence of tumble, perhaps indicating that stone was robbed from the site after the building had fallen out of use. This may also explain why it was difficult to distinguish a floor surface.

We interpret buildings L and K as a unit, on the evidence of the pottery occupied in the 16th century. A forthcoming paper by Caldwell & Ruckley on the architecture of the Lordship of the Isles postulates that structures like K are dwelling houses or halls. Building K might be a barn or store-house.

Buildings K and L were laid down over the remains of earlier structures. Under L and extending to the S of it is structure L.1 which in turn overlies L.2. All three are on the same alignment. L.1 has dry-stone walls while L.2 has a more massive wall [4047] of earth faced with stone, containing a large, stone-lined post-setting [4032]. The W wall of L.1 lies up against a road [4002] extending from the jetty. The jetty extends into the water at right angles to the island foreshore and is built of substantial sub-rectangular blocks of local stone, mostly Port Askaig tillite and quartzites. The road is up to 2m wide and curves gently SE from the jetty to avoid the E end of the great hall.

Another road [4014], 2.20m wide, branches off SW along the edge of the island in the direction of the residential quarters and the Council Isle. Its kerb, immediately under the vegetation, is fairly easy to trace for a distance of about 14m beyond the end of trench 4. Within the trench a drain [4015] was excavated running across it. Also in trench 4 another paved road [4037], running N-S, was partially revealed under the W wall of building K.

Building K overlies K.1, probably a multi-roomed complex serving as kitchens for the Great Hall in the Medieval Period. It is represented by a chamber (K.1a) under K bounded on the N, E, and S, respectively, by walls 2004, 2014 and 2034. Walls 2014 and 2034 (and possibly 2004) have earth cores faced with dry-stone. In wall 2014 there are three large, stone-lined settings for timber uprights. Possibly L.2 in trench 4 is part of the same room. Its floor consists of trampled deposits of peat ash. Within it is set an upper mill-stone [2021], badly damaged by heat, encrusted and rimmed with fire-reddened clay, the remains of the superstructure of an oven or cooking stance of which the mill-stone formed the base. The stone itself is of green schist and has a diameter of 0.58m. It is pierced centrally with a hole and two slots. Adjacent to it a circular setting [2018] of burnt red clay was traced in the ash deposits where another mill-stone had done service as a base. It was evidently of larger size, c0.65m, and had a smaller central hole, suggesting it could even have been the nether stone to go with 2021.

Both these 'ovens' are perched over a large pit [2058], only one edge of which was traced within the area of building K. It was only partially excavated to reveal a loose filling of large boulders (there were air gaps), levelled up with sand and gravel [2023]. The pit is at least 0.25m deep and is interpreted as a soak-away. This chamber also contained a stone-lined drain [2076] extending N-S to the W of the oven bases. From

the ash deposits and the top of the pit were recovered sherds of Scottish late medieval pottery (14th-15th century), and also a barbed arrowhead.

Building K.1 probably also has a further room (K.1b) to the E, bounded by walls 2026, 2040 and 2027, less fully excavated. A further chamber, K.1c, is postulated between K.1a and 12.6 in trench 12.

Building K.2 underlies K.1a and is represented by an E wall [2056] with an earth core faced with stone, and a S wall [2043] of similar construction. K.2 has a stone paved floor [2055] and a large circular (only half was exposed) setting [2053] of burnt red clay about 1.3m in diameter, also interpreted as an oven base. Another stone-lined drain [2075] runs N-S to the E of K.2.

Another building (K.3) - or road? -, lying under K.2, is apparently represented by a paved surface [2060] composed mostly of small irregular quartzite and limestone slabs, tightly packed.

From the evidence of a small sondage cut through this paving and an examination of the side of pit 2058 it was seen that there was earlier occupation on this part of the island. Separated from the paving by a thickness of 100mm of soil containing charcoal and fragments of burnt bone is another horizon of peat ash, about 50mm thick, overlying disturbed deposits of gravel and sand. This ash level was not encountered in another sondage excavated at the SW corner of trench 2. No dating evidence was recovered from these deposits.



Trench 12, oven in Building 12.6.