“A Cultural Backwater”: The “Localness” of Dùn Èistean, Ness and its Place in the Wider Maritime World of Northwest Scotland

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Abstract - The following paper is an updated version of that given at the Maritime Communities conference in 2013, which reported on and discussed aspects of the findings of the Dùn Èistean project excavations. *Dùn Èistean* remains one of only a few late to post-medieval settlements to have been excavated in the Hebrides, and this work has since been published. The following paper provides a resumé of the results of the excavations and then focuses on one particular aspect of the site—that of the strong local identity evidenced in the archaeological record, and how this fits with the location of the stronghold in the wider maritime world of the northwest Highlands and Islands.

Introduction

The excavations on *Dùn Èistean* have produced the first radiocarbon-dated evidence for armed skirmishes on a late medieval clan stronghold in the Western Isles, and the earliest dated excavated gunflint assemblage in Britain (Ballin 2015; Barrowman, R.C. 2015:411–412; Outram and Batt 2015). The first large (over 3500 sherds) stratified and radiocarbon-dated assemblage of 16th- to early 17th-century locally-made Hebridean coarse pottery has also been recovered from the site (Barrowman, R.C. 2015:407–408; Campbell 2015), together with finds of coins, glass, glazed pottery, and a large assemblage of environmental material (Barrowman, R.C. 2015:400–6, Bateson 2015; Cerón-Carrasco 2015a, 2015b; Masson-MacLean 2015; Murdoch 2015; Ramsay 2015a; 2015b; Will 2015). The recent publication of the excavations discusses these highlights (Barrowman, R.C. 2015), but this article will focus more specifically on the “localness” of the site and the material from it, providing perspective on Dùn Èistean’s place in the wider maritime world of the late medieval and post-medieval periods.

The Dùn Èistean project

The Dùn Èistean project was set up in 1999 when the Clan Morrison Society of North America approached Mary MacLeod, who was the Western Isles Council archaeologist at that time, with a view to funding an initial survey and small excavation on the site. Dùn Èistean is a small, cliff-bound tidal island at the north end of the Isle of Lewis in the Western Isles, in a district called Ness (Fig. 1). In local tradition, it is considered to be the stronghold of the Clan Morrison, who currently own Dùn Èistean. At that time, the clan was also raising funds to build a footbridge over to the island in order to allow public access to the site in time for an international clan gathering in Ness in 2002. For 3 seasons between

Figure 1. Location of Dùn Èistean (Illustration 2.2 from Barrowman, R.C. [2015:9,], used with permission).

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2000 and 2002, the Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division (GUARD, now GUARD Archaeology Ltd) conducted topographic and geophysical surveys, dug trial trenches, and performed rescue excavation of the proposed bridge footings. The team, led by Chris Barrowman, included surveyors and archaeologists who were experienced in climbing and rope access work (see Brady and Batey 2008, McHardy et al. 2009), and following the first season when the team camped on the island and climbed on and off at low tide, a rope traverse was set up at the site to enable personnel, equipment, and samples to be hauled backwards and forwards, thereby enabling trial trench excavation to take place (Barrowman, C.S. 2015:20–21, Barrowman, R.C. 2015:19–30).

As the archaeological potential of the site was realized, a larger, multi-disciplinary project was set up. After a short season of further trial trenching in 2003, this ran from 2005 to 2007 and included historical research of local Ness place-names and traditions, extensive excavations on the Dùn, and a survey of the Ness district. The recent publication of the results of the archaeological aspects of this work attempts to address both the academic and public audiences by including three levels of detail: large-type summaries and schematic drawings, smaller-type outlines of results and tables, and a third level of detail, such as catalogues and databases, on a CD in the back of the book (Barrowman, C.S. 2015; Barrowman, R.C. 2015).

A brief description of the site

The phases of activity evidenced from each trench excavated on Dùn Èistean can be grouped into three “general events” to provide a bigger picture of what was going on at the site as a whole. When all the archaeological evidence is taken into account, it can be shown that occupation during the first two general events centered on the latter half of the 1500s and early 1600s AD, with a third general event of small shelters built into the ruins following a period of abandonment towards the end of the 17th century. There is evidence that the stronghold was occupied several times within each of these episodes, but it is impossible to define all of these uses more specifically other than to group them into the 3 general events.

The first buildings and features to be constructed and used on the site include a lookout tower or keep, a defensive wall around the landward perimeter of the island, houses and huts for shelter and storage, a corn-drying kiln barn, and a clamp kiln to fire pottery. All the buildings were made of turf and stone,

with the lower walls having outer skins of large stones and an inner earthen core, with upper walls and roofs of turf and entrances on the opposite side to the prevailing southwesterly wind. Structures F1 and F2 (see Fig. 2), set into the hillside on the east side of the island, had access down to the sea at the top of a natural gully, *Palla na Biorlinn*, in local tradition said to be where the Morrisons hauled up their boats. Material evidence from hearth and floor layers in the buildings on the site suggests activities that took place around the fireside included parching or drying grain prior to grinding and baking, the making and refining of gun flints, and small-scale lead casting for musket balls or pistol shot. Pottery sherds from storage jars, cooking pots, and small drinking cups, as well as fragments of burnt mammal and fish bones, confirm that food and drink were consumed in the buildings.

The most striking building on the site was the rectangular tower, in local tradition called *Tigh nan Arm* or House of the Arms or Armoury. This structure sat on a natural rock platform on the highest point of the island with commanding views east across the Minch to Sutherland and Assynt, south down the east coast of Lewis, and northwards towards the Northern Isles and northern Europe. It had two storeys; a solid base built from thick walls with drystone faces, and an earth core defining a small, central, sub-rectangular chamber, and an upper storey of clay-bonded stonework. What is likely a large lintel stone in situ on the top of the remaining tower wall hints at a window or a door half way up the south side of the tower, and iron nails found in the stone collapse indicate that driftwood timbers were used to support the roof. The walls survived to a height of 2 m, at which the tower had external measurements of ~7 m x 4.5 m. The thick layers of collapsed stonework around the exterior of the tower were all that remained of the upper storey, although it was estimated that this once stood to 2–3 m, judging by the amount of fallen masonry excavated. A perimeter wall, built from an inner and outer stone face and an earth and turf core, encompassed the entire landward side of the island. A pond was also dug to collect water, and radiocarbon dating of the sediments showed that the basal deposits are contemporary with the main occupation of the site in the late 15th to early 17th centuries.

During the second general event, there seems to have been an increase in population on Dùn Èistean. The corn-drying kiln, tower, and perimeter wall remained in use, and houses A1 and A2 and building F1 on the east side of the island were re-occupied. The site was expanded however, with 2 new groups

of agglomerated houses and huts, Structures B and D, built against the perimeter wall on the east and west sides of the island (Fig. 3). The huts on the west side of the site were used as lookout points and probably functioned as a gatehouse, guarding the 2 main access points onto the island. Gaps in the south walls of the huts against the perimeter wall may originally have been “squints” or “loopholes,” as recorded by Captain Thomas from local traditions in the 19th century, through which to view the Ness mainland (see Barrowman, R.C. 2015:15). A cutting through the perimeter wall was found at the top of an access route up the cliffs to the site where the breach between the island and the mainland was at its narrowest. It was paved and lined with stone and functioned as one of the entrances onto the site, where supplies were also probably hauled up onto the site. A second complex of small huts was built against the perimeter wall on the east side of the island and surrounded an open rectangular courtyard. Several floor and hearth deposits were identified, and soils analysis suggests that it was extensively used, perhaps as a main gathering place for the island. In this area, large and mixed assemblages of material were found of the same general character as from all other buildings on the site, including local pottery sherds, carbonized grain and charcoal, peat ash, burnt mammal and fish bone, and small numbers of glazed medieval pottery

sherds, gunflints and flint-working debris, and pistol and musket balls.

Following this second general event, the island was abandoned and deposits of turf slump and stone collapse accumulated. The third and final use of the site then comprised several small, roughly circular, turf shelters or huts built into the ruins of the older buildings. These turf huts can be dated by the glass and pottery found in them to some time between the end of the 1600s, and the beginning of the 1800s AD; they are linked to a casual use of the site for grazing sheep or fishing and are comparable to the small, round or oval turf shieling huts found in Lewis in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Introducing “Localness”

All the building walls excavated on Dùn Èistean were built up to 1 m in height using a stone inner and outer face, filled with a core of earth, turf, and midden material, with an upper layer of turf to roof level. The roofs were also built from turf, resting on a framework of driftwood and other re-used timbers. Even the tower, Structure G, the focal point of the site, was built from very thick, solid earthen walls of mixed clay, ash, and turf, with an outer skin of coursed drystone work of larger stones, including large corner stones, interspersed with lines of smaller pinning stones. A small central chamber

Figure 2. Topographic survey of Dùn Èistean (Illustration 2.14 from Barrowman, R.C. [2015:22], used with permission).

was defined within the solid base by an inner skin of stones. An upper storey of clay-bonded stonework with no earthen core once stood on this solid base. This technique of thick earthen, stone-lined walls is seen in Lewis in later blackhouses, where the inner and outer skins of stone would be laid out and an inner fill of peat ash and clay gradually built up and then tamped down by stamping (see Fenton 1985, Holden 2004, Holden et al. 2001). The soil micro-morphological analysis on the wall core samples from the tower confirmed that this technique was used in the tower construction, and that buildings on the site were constructed from turf stripped from the site (McKenna and Simpson 2015:338-9, Illus. 12.33-8, Table 12.6).

Unfortunately there is little excavated evidence from contemporary sites with which to compare the buildings on Dùn Èistean. Armit's excavations on the shores of Loch Olabhat in North Uist at Druim nan Dearcag and Eilean Olabhat have identified the remains of late medieval to post-medieval turf-and-stone buildings (Armit 1997, Armit et al. 2008), and survey and excavation by Sheffield University of Barra and the Southern Isles investigated several potential medieval turf-and-stone building footings (Branigan and Foster

2000, 2002). However, the evidence from Dùn Èistean verifies that the techniques used in the 18th century as documented in Highland Scotland (see Dodgshon 1993:421–422) and in later 19th-century blackhouses and shielings in Lewis (Mackie 2006) were used in Ness some 300 years earlier in the late medieval, 16th and early 17th centuries, supporting previous hypotheses (see, for example, Fenton 1985:72, Geddes 2006:3.1). Mackie (2014:317–318) points out in her research into the later vernacular houses in the Western Isles, that discovering the origins of the vernacular buildings from 19th century is hampered by the lack of evidence from the medieval and post-medieval periods. In her study of the agglomerated dwellings seen in Lewis in the 19th century, Mackie highlights that there has been no confirmed historical antecedent in the Western Isles for such a house form. Now, with the excavation and radiocarbon dating of the agglomerated dwellings seen at Structures B and D on Dùn Èistean, it is clear that the range and form of late medieval domestic structures found in Lewis was more varied than previously thought, and it is possible to begin to study the development of house form into the post-medieval period and later (Barrowman, R.C. 2015:111–131, 147–171).

Figure 3. Working in Trench B, stone-and-turf buildings situated adjacent to the perimeter wall on the south side of the island (Illustration 5.1 from Barrowman, R.C. [2015:111], used with permission).

There is also evidence for a possible “bed-alcove” in one of the small buildings in Structure B (Barrowman, R.C. 2015:123–124, Illus. 5.18, 388, 395–396), in the form of an area within the small hut that was defined by stones and a small stake-hole, and that was “clean” of floor and occupation debris. The bed-alcove, as studied by Mackie (2013), was a common feature of houses in parts of north and west Ireland and Scotland in the 19th and 20th centuries, and the evidence for a similar feature in a building dated to the late 15th to early 17th centuries may suggest an earlier origin for this tradition. Mackie (2013:24–25) describes 19th-century examples from shielings in Lewis where a sleeping place was made up of grass and rushes spread on turfs, termed a “*cailleach*”; the term is derived from *caille*, a word used to describe the edging of stones along the edge of the turf bed to stop the bedding or even inmates from dropping on to the floor. Many of the features seen in the buildings on Dùn Èistean are recorded in Gaelic names a couple of centuries later in Lewis and are discussed by Mackie in her research (Mackie 2006, NicAiodh 2000). The inner earth fill in a wall, for instance, as used in all buildings on Dùn Èistean, is termed *glutadh*, *glutaran*, or *talamh balla*; the small, wedge-shaped stones used in the stonework of the tower, *spalla*; and even a wooden step or stick laid across the doorway of a building, just like that found in doorway of Structure F on Dùn Èistean, is described as *fàd-bhuinn* (literally, “sole-sod”), a name originating from when a grassy turf was used as a door step. The excavations on Dùn Èistean may provide evidence for the origins of these features, but more archaeological excavation is needed to research the development of the Lewis house in the late medieval and early post-medieval periods.

While the buildings on Dùn Èistean are built in the vernacular tradition, the site is not a domestic, vernacular settlement, but a defended stronghold and symbol of power. There are many sites in Lewis and Harris linked in local tradition to the 16th and early 17th centuries, some of which exhibit the low remains of turf-and-stone buildings, but none have upstanding towers surviving that can be compared with Dùn Èistean. There are comparable sites still visible further south in the Uists and Barra, both in inland lochs and on small coastal stacks (Raven 2005). Many of these include small, 2–3-storey rectangular towers of the same ~6 m x ~5 m dimensions in plan as that on Dùn Èistean. Most are connected to the MacNeils and the Clanranald, and are thought to date to the same 16th- to early 17th-century period as Dùn Èistean. However, all are built of lime-mortared masonry towers, some with 3 floors, and none with the solid earthen walls of the Dùn Èistean

tower. *Caisteal Bheagram* (Castle Beagram) in an inland loch in Drimsdale, South Uist, is considered to be early 16th century and is remarkably similar in dimensions and design, but not building technique. The castle is close to Howmore and 2 chapels, which are traditionally thought to be a medieval monastery and learned center of some importance. Like Dùn Èistean, this medieval site also consists of ancillary buildings all contained within a curtain wall. However, each component is masonry built, the tower is lime-mortared, and turf and earthen wall cores do not appear to have been used as building materials. *Dùn Mhic Leòid* (Sinclair’s Castle, or MacLeod’s Castle) situated on an artificial island in Loch Tanguisdale, Barra, comprises only a rectangular tower 5.4 m x 5.5 m constructed of walls 1.4 m thick standing to 4.5 m high, with the waters of the loch lapping at the base of the walls. Again, the dimensions and plan of this tower are very similar to that on Dùn Èistean, but there the similarities end as *Dùn Mhic Leòid* is built from lime-mortared masonry. There are also examples on rock stacks and coastal islands. *Caisteal Calabhaigh* (Castle Calvay) on the east side of South Uist at the mouth of Loch Boisdale, comprises a stone-built medieval castle with a hall and other buildings built within a curtain wall that has gun slits on the seaward side. *Caisteal a’ Bhreabaidair* (Weaver’s castle), built on a stack to the south of Eriskay, also has turf and stone outbuildings surrounding a mortared stone tower that was traditionally the haven of a pirate.¹

The similarities evident in these sites in dimensions and form are due in part to their common situation in the larger territory of former island lordships in the late medieval period, with a shared aspiration, influence, and cohesion inherited from the time of the MacDonald Lords of the Isles. Examples can be found elsewhere in the former MacLeod lordship in Skye and on the northwestern seaboard of mainland Scotland, in Sutherland, Coigeach, and Assynt (MacCoinnich 2015a:58–60; 2015b:83–90). *Caisteal Maol*, for instance, a simple rectangular towerhouse with 3 floor levels, is similar in that it was strategically placed within the landscape with a commanding outlook, in this case over the narrows that separate Skye from the mainland, and dates to the later medieval period when it was built as the stronghold of the MacKinnons (see Miket and Roberts 1990:32–36). However, this tower is also lime-mortared, probably with a slate roof, and is a towerhouse of recognized form. Therefore, we could find no comparisons on lordship and castle sites for the building techniques used in the tower on Dùn Èistean. The tower on Dùn Èistean, whilst superficially similar to other stone towers on the western

seaboard of Scotland, is markedly different, if not unique, in the building techniques used, which are the same as those used in contemporary “low status” buildings, including the ancillary buildings on Dùn Èistean itself. The Dùn Èistean tower is built in the local vernacular tradition of turf and stone, as used in everyday buildings at the time, as opposed to the imported techniques of lime-mortared masonry and/or slate roofing used in higher-status late medieval buildings elsewhere.

This same use of local materials and techniques is also seen in the artifactual and environmental assemblages from the excavations. The collection of gunflints recovered from across Dùn Èistean (e.g., see Fig. 4), unique in their early date and form, were made on site from found ballast flint according to Torben Ballin (2015). Similarly, the small collection of lead projectiles (musket balls and pistol shot) recovered from the site were studied by Natasha Ferguson of the Centre for Battlefield Archaeology at Glasgow University, who concluded they were made on site from scrap lead using a handheld mold (Ferguson 2015). Colleen Batey (2015) also identified pieces of scrap lead amongst the metalwork assemblage from the site. There is also extensive evidence for the exploitation of the local environment in the environmental assemblage recovered from the excavations. Thousands of oat and barley grains were found charred in hearth and midden deposits, many having been dried at the hearth in a process known as *graddaning*. In this process, the ears on a handful of grain stalks are set on fire and then hastily beaten

with a stick or knocked against a stone to take out the grain (Dwelly 1994:519, Ramsay 2015a:294). Pollen analysis of the basal deposits in the pond on the site (dug to collect rainwater as there is no other fresh water on the site and AMS dated to the late 15th to early 17th centuries) has also identified that the cereals were most likely grown just off site, in the Ness district, and brought already “cleaned” to the site (Ramsay 2015a:292–294, 2015b). A small assemblage of carbonized sheep/goat, cattle, and fish bone has also been recovered amongst hearth deposits resulting from the burning of food waste for fuel, as well as locally cut peat, found wood and driftwood. Due to the acid soils on the site, only carbonized animal bone has survived, but despite the fragmentary nature of the material, some evidence for butchery has been identified on bone fragments (Masson-MacLean 2015). While studying the extensive assemblage of local handmade pottery, Ewan Campbell (2015) has identified that all vessels were made from local clay and in a specific local form that did not evolve from earlier Norse wares. A small number of sherds have fingernail decoration that has not yet been seen anywhere else on pottery of this date in the Western Isles (Campbell 2015).

Local Identity in a Connected Maritime World

It is intriguing to explore why the building techniques used on Dùn Èistean, particularly in the tower, are so different to other clan strongholds and towers found on the Western Isles and elsewhere in the MacLeod lordship, and why local rather than imported techniques and materials were used. Several reasons could be put forward for the construction methods used. It is possible that the tower was built in this way as a specific, local response to the unique environment of Ness, which trumped all other considerations; that is its position as an exposed peninsula jutting right out into the Atlantic and the North Sea necessitated a solid construction. However, as we have seen above, there are similar towers on sea stacks further south in the Uists which are not built using this technique and are in a similar, if not quite as exposed, position. It could also be suggested that this was a response to a particular threat, such as cannon fire from the sea, as a solid earthen base would better contain the impact of cannon fire.² For instance, cannon was used in September 1506 during the siege of Stornoway Castle by the royally sanctioned expedition to Lewis at this time led by George Gordon, the Earl of Huntly as part of the Crown’s efforts to suppress the rebellion headed by Donald Dubh, heir to the forfeit MacDonald Lordship of the Isles (see MacCoinnich 2015a:56,

Figure 4. Gunflints from Dùn Èistean (Illustration 10.46 from Ballin [2015:255], used with permission).

table 3.3; also Cathcart 2012). Unfortunately, the potential link between solid earthen bases and cannon fire cannot be further explored archaeologically in Lewis as no other late medieval occupied stacks have been excavated. Away from these practical, physical suggestions, it could be argued, especially from a modern viewpoint, that the north end of the Western Isles was remote from the mainland centers of power in Edinburgh and London and that the Clan that built on the site lacked the influence and resources of their mainland counterparts and could not, therefore, afford or command resources, such as lime mortar or 3-storey stone towers. To take this to its natural conclusion, it could be suggested that Ness was, as E.C. Curwen (1938:288) wrote when describing the Hebrides, “a cultural backwater,” an area where an “extraordinary culture-lag ... existed ... between the Lowland Zone and the more remote parts of the Highland Zone, due partly to the difficulty of communications, and partly to an inherent conservatism.”

Thanks to research into the contemporary historical background and local traditions of Ness undertaken as part of the Dùn Èistean project (see MacCoinnich 2015a, Stiùbhart 2015), we know that this was clearly not the case. Far from Dùn Èistean being in a backwater, the site was situated in a coastal area that was, at this time, in the thick of maritime trade routes and shipping lanes operating between northern Europe and the Baltic states (MacCoinnich 2015b; see also, Barrett and Orton 2016; Caldwell 2016; Estyn Evans 1996:60–63, 70, 72; Rodger 1997:73–74³). At this time, transport, trade, and communication was by sea, and Dùn Èistean was part of the territories of the former MacLeod lordship that spanned the Minch from Assynt and Sutherland, and across to Lewis and Harris. It was, therefore, in a strategically important location, situated in a busy thoroughfare between the Islands and Ireland to the west and the mainland and beyond to the east, north, and south. Traditionally, Dùn Èistean was the stronghold of the *MacGilleMhoire*, (later known as the Clan Morison, or Morrison; see MacCoinnich 2015A:44), the hereditary *brithemhan* or judges of Lewis, based in Ness. The inhabitants of Lewis, and indeed Ness, were heavily embroiled in the political troubles of the period termed *Linn na Creach* (roughly translated as Age of Raids by contemporary Gaelic writers), for the time from the forfeiture of the MacDonald Lords of the Isles in 1493 to the MacKenzie takeover in Lewis in 1610. This particular local context saw significant infighting amongst the various factions of the MacLeods, between competing clans in Lewis, and ongoing conflict with the Scottish Crown that, struggling to gain

control of the area, exploited competing factions to their advantage (MacCoinnich 2015a:50–55). These struggles included the attempted plantation of Lewis by the Fife Adventurers during the reign of James VI. It commenced in 1598 and, although ultimately unsuccessful, culminated in the Privy Council granting a “commission of fire and sword” to the MacKenzies of Kintail in September 1607 that spelled the destruction of remaining local strongholds, such as Dùn Èistean (MacCoinnich 2015a:54–55).

With its commanding views over the Minch and up and down the Lewis coast, the tower on Dùn Èistean was also ideally placed to monitor traffic and incoming shipping on the Minch (Fig. 5), particularly the Dutch and Lowland Scottish trading and fishing activity (MacCoinnich 2015a:58, 61–62). Small glimpses in the artifactual record of maritime contacts, including 2 coins—a Scottish James VI billon plack and an English Elizabeth I sixpence—and sherds of German stoneware originating from the same wine jar (Bateson 2015, Will 2015), as well as environmental evidence from the site (Ramsay 2015a, 2015b), suggest that the inhabitants were in touch with these trade routes and were also skilled fishermen, involved in offshore and rock fishing for their own consumption. There are possible landing places around the Dùn, especially the gully down to a rocky ledge on the east side of the island called *Palla na Biorlinn*, or Ledge or Gully of the Birlinn (Thomas 1878:516 cited in Barrowman, R.C. 2015:15). The sea approach towards *Palla na Biorlinn* is difficult to navigate and hampered on the northeast side of the island by the location of several large rocks. To modern senses, it could seem that the landing place was not suitable at all. However, it cannot be overemphasized that a population that relied largely on the sea for communication, food, and other supplies, would have been considerably more adept at navigating and negotiating the maritime environment than their modern counterparts (Barrowman, R.C. 2015:399–400). Indeed, a landing place encumbered by offshore rocks and requiring local knowledge to navigate safely was an advantage for a defensive site (Naessens 2007:235).

The location of Dùn Èistean, in an elevated coastal position, suggests that this small island was chosen as much for its view outwards as its position adjacent to the coastal settlements at the north end of Ness. A group of similar coastal stacks with the turf-covered remains of buildings on them are located along the east coast of Lewis and many, like Dùn Èistean, are attributed in local tradition to the late medieval period, such as Dùn Eòradail, Dùn Othail, and Caisteal a' Mhorair (see discussion in Barrow-

man, R.C. 2015:419–422 and references therein). These have been surveyed by the STAC and NALS projects, but none have been excavated (Barrowman, C.S. 2015:139–145; McHardy et al 2009). Comparisons can be made with the Gaelic lordships of Ireland, many of whom benefitted economically from their position in a busy thoroughfare used by English and European fishing and merchant fleets (Breen 2001 and references therein; also see Egan 2018). Egan's paper on the role of the maritime landscape in the expansion of power of the Gaelic Irish O'Donnell lords of Tyroconnell in the 15th century alerts us to the role that the clan stronghold of Dùn Èistean may have played within the former MacLeod lordship. The growth in trade between the Gaelic lords of Ireland and Scotland and the rest of Britain and continental Europe as a result of the development of the fishing industry in the 15th century would have had an impact in northern Lewis (Egan 2018).

Unfortunately, as Stiùbhart (2015:70) points out, “Any historian intending to research the history of Sgìre Nis before the mid-sixteenth century immediately runs up against a fundamental obstacle: the lack of conventional primary written sources.” However, the archaeological record can provide

small glimpses of trade as seen in the artifactual record from the Dùn Èistean excavations, and a study of the siting of these defensive strongholds may illuminate their role by comparison with similar archaeological sites on the northwest coast of Ireland. For instance, in the South Connemara region of County Galway where the Uí Fhlaitbheartaigh (O’Flaherty) lords built coastal tower houses to capitalize on the growing Spanish, French, and southwest English fishing and trading activity off the Atlantic coast of Ireland (Naessens 2007), Naessens (2007:223) identifies 3 concerns that had to be overcome if visiting fishers “were to return to their native ports with their holds full”: “to be allowed to fish without fear of harassment from either the local Irish chiefs or from other seafarers,” to have “access to safe anchorages in severe weather,” and to have adequate onshore “facilities and supplies, particularly of fresh water.” In the politically troubled world of the MacLeod territories on either side of the Minch in the 16th and early 17th centuries, Dùn Èistean, a defensible stack adjacent to a fertile district with sheltered landing places and controlled by the *MacGilleMhoire* brieves, was ideally placed to address these concerns.

Figure 5. View of Dùn Èistean from the northwest across to the mainland, with the ruined tower visible as a mound on its highest point, and the snowy Assynt hills of the mainland across the Minch in the background (Illustration 1.1 from Barrowman, R.C. [2015:1], used with permission).

There is no doubt from the excavations that skirmishes took place at Dùn Èistean, as demonstrated by finds of gun flints and lead projectiles, both of which were manufactured on site. It seems clear from the archaeology that Dùn Èistean was caught up in the wider political conflict and turmoil on Lewis at that time. Within the stratigraphic record, there are also clear indications of repeated short-lived occupation, and what appears to be a hasty solution to constructing and repairing buildings. This is particularly evident in the tower itself, which comprises 2 different building phases. When the tower was initially built, the western half completely slumped and collapsed halfway through its construction, leaving only the east side standing. The cause of the structural failure was likely a fault in the earthen core construction of the tower, which showed clear signs of collapse when excavated. When this catastrophic event occurred, rather than demolishing the tower and starting again, however, a second, stronger tower was built around the first attempt, on a slightly different alignment, with the remaining walling of the first attempt simply incorporated into the rebuild. This approach suggested a hurried response where time was of the essence.

In addition to this accidental collapse, there is also evidence in the archaeological record for deliberate demolition of buildings on the site. When the stronghold was abandoned in the early 17th century, all of the structures on the site gradually collapsed and degraded. However, the collapsed stonework excavated from around the tower was divided into two sharply defined layers of stone rubble, including corner and lintel stones (Fig. 6). The arrangement of these remains may suggest that the upper stone tower had suffered a rapid and catastrophic collapse, and it remains a possibility that it was deliberately knocked down. In addition, soil micromorphological analysis of the latest floor deposit in Structure F1 showed that it collapsed relatively suddenly as the boundary between the floor layer and the fallen layers above it is very sharp, suggesting that the turf roof and/or upper turf walls collapsed while the structure was in use or only just abandoned (McKenna and Simpson 2015:338) and may indicate that this structure was also demolished. These findings are all consistent with the historical background of the troubled times in the late 15th to early 17th centuries in Lewis when feuding between and within clans was exacerbated by the attempts by the Scottish Crown to gain control of the is-

Figure 6. Lower collapse deposit at SW corner of ruined tower, showing collapsed cornerstones (Illustration 9.19 from Barrowman, R.C. [215:205], used with permission).

land, and during which burning and destruction of houses, crops, and livestock has been documented (MacCoinnich 2015a:50–55), as it has been on the mainland (see Dodghson 1993:423). For instance, MacCoinnich (2015a:54–55) draws attention in particular to references to the permission granted by the Privy Council to the MacKenzies in September 1607 to dismantle any “fortalices” and pursue anyone who ran to any “strenths and houses” in Lewis and attack them.

Not only are there indications in the archaeological record of conflict and skirmishing on the site, but the nature of the site itself is indicative of this function, having the constituent parts that are seen on any other castle site: a defensive tower, a surrounding curtain wall with look-out posts, ancillary buildings including kilns and storage buildings, and housing for those taking refuge. Although Ness, and in fact Lewis, is lacking in historical documentation for this period, it seems likely that the Clan Morrison would have had considerable influence within the former lordship as they were the *brithemhan* (brievies), or hereditary judges, for the Clan MacLeod (MacCoinnich 2015a:44–50), and that their unnamed stronghold may well have been Dùn Èistean. We know from comparisons with other legal families in the wider Celtic world that this was a highly influential role. The surviving local traditions concerning the Morrisons have been investigated by the Dùn Èistean history project, and the Ness Archaeological Landscape survey has identified sites on the ground that relate to the local traditions of *An Taigh Mòr*, the Morrison’s large house from which it is said they would dispense justice, while an associated late medieval landscape of churches, the reputed site of MacLeod’s castle, and evidence for a working agricultural landscape have all been identified (see Barrowman, C.S. 2015:120–122, 180–183).

Conclusion

“Localness” is not inconsistent with wider influence. The excavated evidence from Dùn Èistean is a clear indication that this site, and indeed the district of Ness, was not situated in a “cultural backwater.” Rather it was in the thick of the maritime trade and fishing routes operating between northern Europe and the Baltic states and affected by the political struggles of the time between the Scottish Crown and the clans of the Hebrides, in this case the MacLeods, and of the internal skirmishes taking place within and between the clans themselves as they fought for control. Rather, the evidence for local adaption, the use of local building techniques and

a strong local identity within a world subject to outside influences and forces, suggests a degree of autonomy existed in the Ness district. Interestingly no remains of any earlier buildings or material were recovered from Dùn Èistean, despite the extensive excavations and radiocarbon-dating program (other than residual quartz found scattered in all soils), suggesting that the buildings were all constructed in the late medieval period, with no predecessor before them. The site, therefore, was not chosen so as to capitalize on any forerunning kudos or glory, such as a pre-existing Iron Age dun. It was built quite literally from the ground up, borne out of the local population, and not imposed by an external political power.

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Endnotes

¹There are local traditions and documentary references to piracy in the seas around the Western Isles, and between the men of Lewis and Orkney, including the men of Ness (see MacCoinnich 2015a:58–61; see also Raven 2005 for the Uist clans and piracy). As yet no archaeological survey has been undertaken in the islands to examine the evidence for piracy, although I am grateful to Dr Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart for drawing my attention to Connie Kelleher's paper, "Pirate Ports and Harbours of West Cork in the Early Seventeenth Century," (*Journal of Maritime Archaeology* (2013) 8:347–366), which explores the archaeological evidence for piracy along the southwest coast of Munster and gives an indication of the types of features that may be present.

²Pers. comm. Mr. James Crawford.

³I am grateful to Dr. Alison Cathcart for bringing these to my attention.