

A SURVEY OF THE ANTIQUITIES OF NORTH RONA

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The island of North Rona,¹ now a National Nature Reserve, has received little attention from antiquarians since the visits of T. S. Muir in 1857 and 1860. In the summer of 1958 members of the Glasgow University North Rona Expedition undertook, as part of a more comprehensive research programme, to survey and describe the ancient structures on the island. This work was carried out under favourable conditions by the authors and Mr. J. S. B. Donald.² No excavation was undertaken, and it is clear that much tumbled material must be removed before more accurate planning can be accomplished.

In this account a resume is given of the recorded history of the island, followed by a detailed description of the domestic and ecclesiastical structures now visible on the ground. Relative dates for these structures are discussed in the final section.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

North Rona (Grid Ref. HW 809323) lies approximately 45 miles N.N.E. of the Butt of Lewis and a similar distance N.W. of Cape Wrath. The island, which is less than half a square mile in area, is out of sight of the mainland in all but the most exceptionally fine weather, when the peaks of Sutherland and the flat surface of north Lewis are visible on the horizon to the south. The very exposed situation ($59^{\circ}07'N.$, $5^{\circ}49'W.$) implies atmospheric conditions which are seldom quiet, but the relatively low maximum altitude of 355 ft. in Toa Rona is insufficient to cause unduly great precipitation although conditions cannot be described as other than damp. The island is species-poor in both flora and fauna; the former comprise only about 50 varieties, of these about a sixth are grasses which provide a sufficiently close cover to maintain a flock of 140 sheep.

A central ridge, cliff-lined at its W. end and culminating in Toa Rona at the E. end dominates the island. The average height of the ridge is just under 300 ft. and it is broken in a single saddle W. of the Toa at about 225 ft. From this ridge the surface slopes away to the south at an average gradient of 1 in 7 terminating in low cliffs of 50 to 100 ft. in height. On the N. side the slope is

¹ On modern maps the name appears simply as Rona. Since there are several islands of this name among the Hebrides, and since Rona, without qualification, is normally understood to refer to the island (formerly called South Rona) north of Raasay in the Sound of Skye, the colloquial and convenient name North Rona is here used for the island under discussion.

² We wish to express our indebtedness to the University of Glasgow, to the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland, and to Mr. Charles Hepburn of Glasgow, for generous financial assistance without which the Expedition could not have taken place. This success we owe largely to Sir Hector Hetherington, former Principal of Glasgow University, who took a personal interest in what was essentially an undergraduate venture. Thanks are due also to all firms and individuals who gave or lent equipment, notably Miss A. S. Robertson of the Hunterian Museum, and the Geography Department, University of Glasgow; to Lt.-Cdr. R. C. Dumas, R.N. (Aultbea), and the crew of M.F.V. 289, for taking us to North Rona and subsequently retrieving us; and to Mr. R. B. K. Stevenson, Mr. R. G. Livens, and Mr. C. A. Raleigh Radford for guidance and criticism throughout the preparation of this paper. Mr. Radford has maintained an unflagging interest in the work, and his comments have been particularly valuable.



Aerial photograph of the village area, North Rona
(R.A.F. photograph; Crown Copyright)



A. The church from the S., showing nave (left) and earlier oratory (right)



B. The village, North Rona, from the N.

much steeper at about 1 in 4, dropping to a wave-cut platform extending northward at about 40 to 80 ft. in the peninsula of Fianuis. Similar rock benches may be found fringing the island at varying heights including the south-westerly peninsula of Sceapull and the rock-islands of Loba Sgeir, Gealldruig Mor and Gealldruig Beag.¹

The island is difficult of access, the normal landing-place being on the E. side of Fianuis, though this is impossible in easterly winds. Landing seems impossible in all but calm conditions, due to the ever-present swell which is never less than 3 to 4 ft. and commonly much more. The island is part of a tenancy in Ness, Lewis, the area with which the island has had contact in the past. It is visited annually for the purpose of tending the sheep-stock, and probably much more frequently by trawlermen. Sula Sgeir, a rock-island about 9 miles W. of North Rona is also visited by men from Ness who collect *gugas* (young gannets) which are dried and eaten as a delicacy by Ness-men the world over.

HISTORY OF THE ISLAND

A persistent tradition maintains that the first inhabitant of the island was a holy man called Ronan, and that the name Rona, variously spelt Roney, Ronay, Ronaidh, is derived from him. Derivation from Gaelic *ron*, a seal, has also been suggested, although the Norse *braun-ey* (rough, rugged isle) finds greater favour.

Near Eoropie, in the north of Lewis, there is the well-documented site of a church called Teampull Ronaidh, and this in all probability was the parent establishment from which the church on North Rona was founded. There is, therefore, some justification for associating the name of Saint Ronan with the island.

The story of Saint Ronan's arrival on the island is well related by Muir.² The saint, it is said, did not enjoy his residence at Eoropie, for he was greatly tormented by the Devil and vexed by the evil tongues of the people, especially the women. After praying three times to be delivered from their company, he was told in a dream to go to a certain part of the shore. This he did, and met an obliging whale which carried him to North Rona and landed him at Sron an t-Tinntir (Fireplace Point) on its southern coast. There, some say, he encountered a pack of monstrous dog-like animals, with long claws and great round eyes glowing like hot coals, which after a fierce battle he drove backwards over the cliff at Leac na' Sgrob, where the scratches they made on the rocks with their claws can be seen to this day. Others say it was the Devil himself who assailed Ronan, and raised a great storm in an attempt to blow the holy man and his teampull clean off the island; but Ronan got up and put his back against the door, so that the teampull held fast, and the Devil was vanquished,

¹ R. A. Gailey. *Scot. Geog. Mag.* (1959), Vol. 75 no. 1, p. 48.

² T. S. Muir: *Characteristics of Old Church Architecture* (1861), p. 189 *et seq.*; *Ecclasiological Notes on some of the Islands of Scotland* (1885), p. 80 *et seq.*

although the west wall of the teampull (*i.e.* the oratory) was partially blown in, and retains its concavity still. The claim of North Rona to be the site of this battle does not pass undisputed, however, for a similar account of Ronan's tussle with the Devil occurs in verse from the Border Country.

A later version of the story provides Ronan with a sister, 'fair Brenhilda of a thousand virtues,' who came also to Rona. For some misdemeanour she was deported to the neighbouring rocky island of Sula Sgeir, 9 miles W. of Rona. There she sat gazing at Rona and pining for her brother until at last she died, and the following summer her skeleton was found with a shag nesting in the cavity of the ribs.

Genuine historical writings on North Rona are meagre and discontinuous. A summary account, however, will be of value in relating dates and customs to the structures now found on the island. Much of the earlier literature is quoted at length by Muir,¹ and a summary of notable events up to 1946 is given by Atkinson.²

The earliest account of Rona is that of Dr. Donald Monro, High Dean of the Isles, who travelled in 1549.³ The number of inhabitants is not specified, but it appears to have been subject to certain limits. The community was self-supporting; abundant corn (bere or barley) was grown 'by delving onlie', and cattle and sheep were reared. A certain maximum number of cattle and sheep was decreed for the island by an ancient right. Duties were paid to MacLeod of Lewis in the form of meal packed in sheepskins, livestock over and above the number that could be maintained on the island, 'certain reistit (*i.e.*, dried) muttan, and many reistit foulis'.⁴

Buchanan in his *Historia* follows Monro in detail, adding, 'Atque ita soli, ut opinor, in universo orbe sunt, quibus nihil unquam deest, omnia ad satietem redundant'.⁵

When a death occurred on the island, the people left a spade and a shovel in the church, and in the morning they would find the place of the grave marked out.

Thanks to the writings of MacKenzie⁶ and Martin,⁷ we have a clear picture of life on North Rona in the latter half of the 17th century. At that time the island was tenanted by five families, numbering some thirty individuals. 'They have a kind of commonwealth among them, in so far if any of them have more children than another, he that hath fewer taketh from the other what makes his number equal, and the excrescence of above thirty souls is sent with the summer boat to the Lewes to the Earl of Seafort their master.' (MacKenzie.) In such a small community, the men frequently had difficulty in finding wives,

¹ Muir (1885), *op. cit.*

² R. Atkinson. *Island Going* (1949).

³ In *Miscellanea Scotica* the date is quoted erroneously as 1594.

⁴ D. Monro. *Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* (Edinburgh 1774).

⁵ G. Buchanan. *Rerum Scotticarum Historia* (c. 1580), Lib. primus, XLIV.

⁶ G. MacKenzie. *Account of Lewis, etc., presented to Sir Robt. Sibbald* (c. 1700). Sibbald MSS., XXIV, 2-9 (Advocates' Library, Edinburgh).

⁷ M. Martin. *Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (c. 1695).

and women were on occasion sent out to them from Lewis. Rules of property among the people were strictly observed; each family had its own land, fishing-rocks, etc. and Dr. Darling¹ claimed that he was able to distinguish a five-fold division in the lazybed-area. Money was unknown to them. Cows and sheep were kept, barley and oats were grown, and dues were paid in the form of meal stitched up in sheepskins, and sea-birds' feathers. Driftwood served as fuel. The area under cultivation at that time is not known. There was never a horse on Rona, and those natives who saw one on coming to Lewis for the first time were greatly thrilled by the sight.

Daniel Morison, Martin's informant, states that there were 'three Inclosures', which we take to mean the three groups of domestic buildings. He says, 'every Tennant hath his Dwelling-house, a Barn, a House where their best Effects are preserv'd, a House for their Cattle, and a Porch on each side of the Door to keep off the Rain or Snow. Their Houses are built with Stone, and thatched with Straw, which is kept down with Ropes of the same, pois'd with Stones'. It is difficult to reconstruct five such homesteads from the existing three groups of ruins. Religious observances were strict, although, it would appear, sufficiently unorthodox at the time to merit the following detailed descriptions.

'There is a Chappel here dedicated to Saint Ronan, fenc'd with a Stone Wall round it; and they take care to keep it neat and clean, and sweep it every day. There is an Altar in it on which there lies a big Plank of Wood about ten foot in length, every foot has a hole in it, and in every hole a stone, to which the Natives ascribe several Virtues; one of them is singular, as they say, for promoting speedy delivery to a woman in Travail . . . They repeat the Lord's Prayer, Creed, and Ten Commandments in the Chappel every Sunday Morning.'²

'There is a chappel in the midst of the isle, where they meet twice or thrice a day. One of the families is hereditary Beddall, and the master of that stands at the altar and prayeth, the rest kneel upon their knees and join with him. Their religion is the Romish religion.'³

The year 1683, as nearly as can be determined, was a disastrous one for the Rona community, when 'a swarm of Rats, but none knows how, came in to Rona, and in a short time eat up all the Corn in the Island. In a few Months after, some Seamen landed there, who Robbed the poor people of their Bull. These misfortunes and the want of supply from Lewis for the space of a year occasioned the death of all that Ancient Race of People'.⁴ These sad words mark the end of an epoch.

An attempt was made to repopulate the island with five or six families, but all the men were drowned when their boat capsized during a sealing expedition; six months later their wives and children were taken back to Lewis. After this, says legend, the island was inhabited by an ancient woman, who tested the tradition that the fire was never extinguished on Rona by throwing water on her own. The fire went out; but she having offered fervent prayers, it was rekindled by divine agency.

¹ F. F. Darling, *A Naturalist on Rona* (1939).

² Martin, *op. cit.*

³ MacKenzie, *op. cit.*

⁴ Martin, *op. cit.*

Of the state of Rona in the 18th century next to nothing is known. In 1764 the population numbered nine.¹ At the time the first Statistical Account was written the island was rented for £4 per annum by a Ness tacksman and tenanted by a single family. Dues were paid annually in the form of corn, butter, cheese, sheep, cattle, wildfowl and feathers.²

Such was the arrangement when MacCulloch visited the island in 1809. The tenant, Kenneth MacCaigie, cultivated 6 or 7 acres, producing barley, oats and potatoes. He had a cow and 50 sheep; cheese was made from the milk of the sheep. The tacksman received annually 8 bolls of barley (about 48 bushels) and 8 stones of feathers. MacCulloch specifies that these were gannet feathers, but this seems unlikely since Rona is considered unsuitable for the gannets and none nest there now. The nearest gannetry is 9 miles away, on Sula Sgeir, and it is known that the tenant was not permitted to have a boat. Turf is said to have been cut for use as fuel.

The house is described as being 'excavated in the earth', with stone walls rising only 2 feet above the surface level; the roof almost flat, and covered in turf, above which was a rough thatching; the entrance, an aperture some 3 feet in height leading to the interior by a long, narrow and tortuous passage. Lateral niches served as bed-places, and the fire was on a raised platform, with the smoke-hole toward one side of the building.³ This description is closely applicable to Group C of the village.

A system of this type remained in operation until the island was finally evacuated. Iain MacKay gave T. S. Muir some information on the customs of the islanders in the early years of the 19th century. The teampull, he said, was treated with great respect, being kept in good condition and turfed over. They would never rob a stone from the teampull or the cladh (churchyard wall); they put lime on the eastern part of the teampull, but not on the other, which had not been built by Saint Ronan. There was a wooden hook, just inside the door, that Ronan hung his hat on when he went in, and the children used to hang scraps of wool or other small objects on it, to see if they would still be there the next time. On the night before New Year two candles were burnt on the altar, and everyone went out to the graveyard to look at the light through the three holes in the cross that stood there, presumably in commemoration of Ronan's encounter with the Devil.⁴ The last inhabitant was Donald MacLeod, called the King of Rona, who lived alone there for a year, and left the island in 1844.

From that date until the present day, Rona has been rented by Ness farmers, who pasture about 150 sheep there, and on their annual shearing visit maintain the fank and one or two of the stone bothies on Fianuis, the northern peninsula. Until the early years of the present century, regular visits were made for the purpose of killing seals; some of the ruinous bothies on Fianuis may have been

¹ J. Walker. *An Economical History of the Hebrides and Highlands of Scotland* (1808).

² *Statistical Account of Scotland* (1797), Vol. 19, p. 271.

³ J. MacCulloch. *The Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland* (1824), Vol. III, p. 301 *et seq.*

⁴ Muir (1861), *op. cit.*

erected by the seal-hunters. Boats are known to have been hauled up on Sceapull, the south-western peninsula, where a boat-noost or cradle and the remains of a stone bothy are still visible. A 'melancholy event' worthy of record occurred in 1885. Two Ness men, Murdoch MacKay and Malcolm MacDonald, having had a difference of opinion with the local preacher, banished themselves to North Rona, and took up residence there in May, 1884. In April, 1885, the two men were found dead. The bodies were buried, then exhumed and taken to the mainland for postmortem, and finally returned to the graveyard on Rona, where the 'Ness Shepherds' Stone'—an ornate sandstone slab—is a prominent feature.¹ The only event of recent years to leave its mark on the island has been the burial in 1941 in the village precincts of an unidentified man, thought to be a German seaman. In the course of the past one hundred years, a certain amount of destruction has been wrought in the village by naturalists and casual visitors, but this was found to be less serious than had been anticipated.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS

The principal archaeological remains on the island consist of the village area including St. Ronan's Church and enclosure and associated structures, and three distinct groups of domestic dwellings. These lie within a cultivated area surrounded by a head-dyke; outside this area are a fold and a number of mounds of loose stones to the W., two lines of similar mounds in the depression to the E. of the village and below Toa Rona, some faint turf marks at the upper end of the more easterly of these two lines and on the E. end of the central ridge, and on the peninsula of Fianuis a series of irregular enclosures, some barely recognisable as such, together with the remains of several stone-built huts. Also on Fianuis is a sheep-fank, possibly modern, which is still used. The ecclesiastical and domestic structures of the village will be discussed in detail later.

West of the village and the cultivated area or infield, is a complex of six small enclosures (Pl. XIV); the dry-stone boundary walls are poorly preserved apart from one section on the S.W. perimeter where they remain to a height of 4 ft. At the centre of the complex are the remains of one circular and two rectangular huts. The complex appears on the six-inch map as 'Cro Mhic Iain Choinnich', suggesting its use as a fold. Thus in all probability the small huts were used for calving and lambing purposes. Traces of cultivation are absent here, as everywhere except within the head-dyke.

Also west of the village and outside the head-dyke are rectangular or oval mounds, some now sod-covered but originally stone-built. They vary from as little as 3 to a maximum of about 16 ft. along the long axis. The smaller examples can have been little else than mere piles of stones probably representing field or pasture clearance, but the larger oval mounds may be the ruined remains of

¹ J. A. Harvie-Brown. *Proc. Roy. Phys. Soc. Edin.* (1887), 1885-88, p. 284.

structures analogous to the *plantie-krubs* of the Shetlands—small enclosures for raising cabbages or other vegetables, with high walls to protect the crops from severe winds in such an open situation. Alternatively these larger mounds may be the remains of structures similar to the *cleits* of St. Kilda. Darling has suggested that some of these mounds may have been stone bases on which to dry peat¹, but to the present writers this seems unlikely.

East of the village, in the depression below Toa Rona, these larger oval mounds reappear in two lines and joined by the remains of stone-built walls of unknown height. Both are oriented approximately N.N.E.-S.S.W. The orientation of these mounds and their connecting walls is puzzling—one interpretation may be that a rotation of grazing was observed and that these lines served to separate the Toa from the remainder of the island. From field survey alone, however, no satisfactory explanation can be offered.

At the E. end of the central ridge of the island and at the foot of a small conical outcrop of pegmatite just W. of Geodha Mairi, are faint traces of what appear to be two, probably three, small rectangular enclosures with possibly a small rectangular hut associated. Such traces could have been produced by the cutting of turf for roofing or fuel, and elsewhere on the ridge there are traces of such activities.

At the base of the northerly peninsula of Fianuis is the sheep-fank already referred to, together with a small wall across the neck of the peninsula. This is used by shepherds from Lewis who periodically visit the island to examine the small sheep stock. North of this and on the east-facing side of the head deposit which partially masks the peninsula, is a number of small irregular enclosures crudely outlined without properly constructed walls. With one of these are associated the remains of some stone-built huts, the corbelled roof of one remaining intact. The purpose of these enclosures is obscure. Certainly no cultivation could ever have been undertaken here. They may be associated with either sheep or cattle and may well be relatively recent. The one roofed hut is still used by the shepherds during their periodic visits.

The infield area, with the village site, is on the south-facing slope of the central ridge of North Rona. The gradient of the slope is approximately 1 in 7 and the situation is not particularly sheltered. Greater protection might have been found $\frac{1}{4}$ mile further E. in the depression W. of Toa Rona, but probably fresh water supply ultimately determined the choice of site. The two wells still carrying water are both within the infield, though one is now badly fouled and the water of the other is slightly salty.

The infield of about $17\frac{2}{3}$ acres is surrounded by the remains of a head-dyke of dry-stone construction of which the bottom course and in places two courses remain. The wall was a single course thick and often had orthostats 18—24 ins. high at the base. In places large irregular stones (glacial erratics) have been included. The original height of the head-dyke is unknown. From its most northerly point a wall of similar nature continues northward and upslope to

¹ Darling, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-8.

the crest of the island, and on to the cliff-edge (Pls. XIV and XV_B). At the N.W. side of the infield the plan suggests that the original area was added to, leaving the fragmented remains of an earlier head-dyke S.E. of the later one. The remains of the walls are too fragmentary to determine their exact relationships by ground survey alone.

Most of the infield has been cultivated in sinuous cultivation ridges, although immediately S. of the village the narrower ridges give place to broad flat surfaces up to 20 ft. across, separated by narrow shallow trenches, which sometimes appear only as slight linear depressions. Commonly the sinuous ridges are rectangular or slightly semi-ovoid in cross-profile, but unlike most ridges of this type they are neither of constant depth nor width; in width they taper and in depth become shallower upslope. The intervening trenches are frequently much wider than the ridges. At their wider lower ends the ridges are up to 7 ft. across but upslope they may disappear altogether. The maximum depth is about $3\frac{1}{8}$ ft. of reddish well-drained loamy soil but at the upslope ends there may be as little as 6 to 9 ins. of soil. Over the whole of the infield E. and N. of the village the ridges terminate in bulbous mounds where the maximum depth, as already stated, is up to $3\frac{1}{8}$ feet, though more commonly 2 to $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet is found. According to slope and situation within the cultivated area, the ridges vary from as little as 10 ft. to a maximum of 150 ft. long, and this, coupled with the deeper downslope ends, gives rise to a terrace-like effect, marking this part of the infield off into several distinct areas separated by narrow pathways immediately below the bulbous ends of the ridges. It is unlikely that the bulbous terminations may be explained entirely by soil-creep downslope, though this may have been a contributory factor; rather this seems to have been a conscious attempt to counteract the steep slope of the infield.

The primary function of these ridges is to facilitate surface drainage, for, despite the steepness of the slope, the surface outside the infield, and the trenches between the ridges in the lower part of the infield, are frequently marshy. Two trenches cut into the sides of ridges N.E. of the village showed that the soil of the ridges is a reddish loam with a considerable quantity of grit (mainly quartz) and frequent small pebbles and decayed organic matter. This resembles some of the deposit on the floor of the passages in Group C of the domestic structures in the village, and it seems clear that midden material must periodically have been added to the cultivated soil both for reasons of fertility and to increase the total soil available. The soil in the ridges contrasts markedly with the heavy peaty and poorly drained soil of the intervening trenches, a difference clearly recognisable in the present vegetation cover.

In one of the trenches cut into the ridges was found a line of small boulders running diagonally beneath the ridges and aligned N.W. to S.E., a feature not evident at the surface. This is probably all that remains of a crude stone-lined drain and may be the remains of a feature similar to the shallow trenches remarked on above in the area S. of the village. Mr. Radford has suggested that these might be similar to early drainage channels he noticed in areas of old cultivation in the vicinity of the excavations at Birsay, Orkney.

Apart from the suggested addition to the cultivated area noted on the N.W. perimeter of the infield, immediately N. and W. of the village there is a small enclosure of about $\frac{4}{5}$ ths of an acre surrounded and closed off against the cashel or churchyard wall by a sod and stone wall quite unlike the head-dyke in construction (Pl. XIV). Within this enclosure the ridges run E. to W. in the upper part, changing to N.W. to S.E. in the lower or southern part, giving to the individual ridges a dog-leg formation. The maximum width of these ridges is 8 ft., though most are only about 4 ft. wide. They are 2 to 5 ft. apart, 9 to 12 ins. deep, and there is neither the tapering nor any trace of the terracing effect already noted elsewhere in the infield.

Lastly, there is within the head-dyke, apart from the village, the ruin of a stone-built structure, now badly tumbled, but apparently square in ground plan with sides 10 to 12 ft. long. It may have been divided internally at its lower end by a partition 3 to 4 ft. long. The purpose of this structure cannot be found from ground survey alone. It may have been a small byre or storehouse, but there are no references in the literature dealing with Rona which suggest a separate building of this nature.

Parallels and dating of the features discussed above will be left for consideration with the dating of the village remains. The village area itself will be discussed in detail under two heads: ecclesiastical structures (church, cashel and associated structures), and domestic structures (three groups of structures, mostly corbelled, each group distinct from the other two, one including an enigmatic rectangular dwelling with fireplace and chimney in the thickness of a straight gable, and another group having associated a small, possibly early, dwelling of Hebridean blackhouse type).

THE DOMESTIC STRUCTURES (FIG. 1)

The three groups are in varying stages of preservation. Group A, to the S.E. of the church, is badly tumbled; although its plan is roughly discernible, in most cases the openings between adjoining cells are obscured. The remains are now fairly well covered with turf but the walls remain standing to a height of some 5 ft. over a large part of the group. Group B is immediately S.W. of the graveyard and built partly into the cashel wall. More of the original roofing remains than in group A, but in places this is caving in. A later structure has been built inside the remains of the earlier group and this has been referred to by various people as the 'manse'. Group C, S.W. of group B, is the best preserved of the three and in parts retains its roofing. At the S.W. corner of a small enclosure on the W. side of the group is a domestic building of a character differing from that of the rest of the village and which has the appearance of being the remains of a primitive blackhouse of Hebridean type.¹ It is most unlikely that either this building or the 'manse' was ever corbelled, the method apparently used for roofing the rest of the village. All three groups

¹ C. Sinclair. *The Thatched Houses of the Old Highlands* (1953).

show certain similarities, both in plan and individual detail; following brief descriptions of each group and of the similarities between them, group C will be described in detail. Involving less interpretation and including nearly all the features contained in all three groups, group C gives the clearest picture of the corbelled domestic buildings on the site.

Group A

The state of preservation of this group has already been noted and the remains are now well covered in turf, the colonisation apparently having started with tussocks of *armeria*. Much of the detail is obscured by tumbled material, but the general layout appears to be a rectangular main structure with rounded corners, no. 1 on plan, surrounded by smaller circular or oval cells or 'huts'. The long axis of the central large structure is aligned approximately N. to S., and it measures about 25 ft. by 10 ft. with the walls everywhere standing to over 4 ft. and in three places rising to over 6 ft. The stone is all undressed, the individual stones being flattish and averaging possibly 12 ins. long. The walls are all of dry-stone construction. At the N.W. corner are two small cells, 3 and 4; they are very badly ruined and the arrangement of the entrances could not be determined accurately. These two do not seem to have been connected directly with the main central structure, N. of which is another oval cell, no. 5, about 12 ft. long, which may have had an entrance leading into the N. end of the larger structure, although the present gap has at least been widened by tumbling. Hut 5 was certainly connected with hut 6 to the S.E. which is again oval in shape and, in turn, was definitely connected with the central structure. Part of the roofing seems to remain over hut 6, but the whole is badly overgrown with *armeria* and turf. Hut 7 almost certainly exists, but the entrance is obscured by tumbled material. The preservation of the group is such that it remains uncertain where the main entrance leading to the centre of the complex was situated. E. of the group and connected with it are two small enclosures, 8 and 9, the northerly one being approximately twice the size of that to the south. It is certain that these were not roofed over and were probably either compounds for animals, or stack yards. Only a very indefinite idea of the group can be formed, but it seems certain that huts 6 and 7 were corbelled, probable that 5, and 2 if it exists, were corbelled and likely that 3 and 4 were similarly roofed. The roofing of the central structure, no. 1, will be discussed later (p. 113).

Group B

Group B is somewhat different, in a rather better state of preservation and contains a later dwelling built inside the earlier structure. B1 is this later addition. It is rectangular, with walls 5 ft. high and straight gables at either end. It measures 11 ft. by 20 ft. with the long axis set N.W.—S.E. The N.W. gable contains a chimney and small fireplace, the latter placed slightly off-centre at the foot of the gable. The S.E. gable has a large window, widening inwards, and a doorway spanned by a single lintel stone. The doorway is about $5\frac{1}{2}$ ft. high and $2\frac{1}{2}$ ft. broad, while the window is about $2\frac{1}{2}$ ft. high by 2 ft. wide.

A striking detail is the use of flat stones at the top of the side walls set at the same angle as the gable edges; it is suggested that these were to keep down the edges of the thatch and to provide a streamlined roof in this exposed situation. Some of the stone used in the construction of this building is roughly dressed, especially in the gables, and the walls are roughly coursed. This building is referred to by various writers as the 'manse' and is almost certainly of 19th-century origin. It is strange to find a straight gabled domestic building here for the native houses on the nearest parts of the mainland and the Outer Isles were of Sinclair's Hebridean type with hipped ends.¹ The 'manse' was clearly built inside pre-existing structures and it seems likely that it replaced the central sub-rectangular structure of a group similar to group A. This suggestion received a measure of support from the existence of two curved hollows 7 and 8 cut into the S. side of the cashel wall adjacent to the 'manse'; these may be the remains of flanking cells destroyed when the manse was constructed, if so they are earlier than the manse but probably later than the cashel wall. This interpretation supports the former existence of a larger central structure on approximately the same axis as the present 'manse' and surrounded by a series of probably circular cells, covered by corbelled roofs. Cell 2 provides a crude anteroom to the 'manse' and was almost certainly corbelled, while the corbels remain in position over huts 3 to 6 which are probably interconnected. Their connections with the original central structure remain unknown. Huts 9 and 10 were of a different nature; 9 is roofless, but 10 remains intact with the corbels in place and covered with 12 to 18 ins. of turf. Originally, the structure was completely turf-covered. The entrance to 10 at the E. end is about 3 ft. high and there is a considerable covering of debris over the floor inside. The interior dimensions are about 6 ft. by 3 ft. and the interior height about $4\frac{1}{2}$ ft. Hut 9 seems to have been similar. These two were separated from the remainder of the group by two rectangular enclosures, 11 and 12, lying parallel, about 25 ft. long by 10 ft. wide, with their long axes oriented N.E. These could easily have been roofed, but no indications of such roofing remain. Alternatively, they may have been stack yards, in which case huts 9 and 10 would probably have been stores of some description. S.E. of the main part of the group are the remains of what look like two further huts, 13 and 14. These are now very badly ruined and their exact relationship to the rest of the group is not clear.

Group C

Group C is by far the best preserved of the three and is strikingly similar to group A. It consists essentially of a single large sub-rectangular structure surrounded by smaller circular or oval cells, but in this case displaying also two passages. On the E. side of the group is a sunken rectangular enclosure, 9, analogous to 8 and 9 in group A. S. of this is a raised platform so overgrown that its purpose is obscure. To the N. and W. of the central structure, much of the corbelled roofing remains and there is evidence to suggest that the central structure was similarly covered.

¹ Sinclair, *op. cit.*

Summary

The three groups show certain distinct similarities. If we accept that the 'manse' is built inside an earlier structure of similar size, then essentially, each group consists of a single large sub-rectangular structure grouped around which are a number (6 in the cases of groups A and C, and 7 in B) of circular or oval cells and groups B and C show these cells to have been interconnected. Groups A and C had their larger structures oriented N.—S. while that in group B was aligned parallel to the adjacent cashel wall. Also connected with each group were small enclosures, either for stock or for use as stack yards. Group B displays two small single cells probably used as stores or as winter housing for young stock. Group C shows the individual characteristic of passages, square in section, with vertical walls. Rectangular structures, unlike any other domestic buildings on the site, are outstanding in groups B and C, in the 'manse' and small blackhouse respectively.

Detailed description of Group C

The large central structure in group C measures approximately 43 ft. in a N.-S. direction and about 13 ft. wide opposite the W. doorway, which leads to hut 5, but slightly narrower nearer the S. end of the structure. The building is thus not quite rectangular; it shows slight rounding at the N. end, a feature more pronounced at the S. end of the structure, and at both ends some original corbels remain in position. In places, the walls thus appear to overhang. These features are repeated, though not so strikingly, at the south end of the seemingly analogous structure, A1. The walls remain to a height of over 5 ft. and on the S.W. side to over 6 ft., the only exception being where the roofing over hut 7 and the ends of the passages has given way, obscuring the E. doorway which, however, is known to have existed. The walling is all dry-stone and it seems highly probable that the ends of the structure, at least, were originally corbelled. Much tumbled material obscures the floor, particularly in the northern half of the structure. The entrance in the W. wall is well preserved with the lintel stones in place. These were four in number and measured $3\frac{1}{2}$ ft. long by 1 ft. broad. The entrance as it stands at present, is 4 ft. high and 2 ft. wide, with the side walls vertical. There was a step up from the original surface inside to the level of the entrance and a threshold stone is still in position at the inner edge of the entrance. The gap in the S. wall, which is also above the original floor level, is interesting in that it was blocked by secondary walling less than half the thickness of the original wall, the outer faces of the two being continuous. On neither face had this secondary walling been bonded into the original. This would have left a recess similar to that remaining in the N. wall, which is complete and measures 3 ft. deep and 5 ft. high at the wall face, but $4\frac{1}{2}$ ft. high at the back.

Hut 2, S.W. of the central structure, is almost circular and defined today by remains of stone walls, but no roofing, and the stone wall is continued as a turf-covered mound to form the entrance with the outer side of the S. wall of hut 3. An ill-defined turf bank continues S.W. from beside the entrance. This hut is continued as a recess into the walling on the S. side of hut 3. The recess is still roofed by corbels and at the back a narrow low entrance connects with hut 3. A single lintel stone remains in place over this entrance, with another displaced, and the entrance itself is partly blocked by tumbled material.

Hut 3 is sub-rectangular with a shallow but narrower extension at the entrance forming a sort of lobby. The walls are much thicker and of better construction than around hut 2, but are well grown over with *armeria* tussocks, especially at the W. end where the entrance is partly blocked by tumbled material, including one of the original lintel stones. The E. end of the structure is similarly obscured by the remains of roofing stones, but it is certain that there was no entrance through into the large central structure. The N. wall of the hut is straight

and well preserved and clearly had an entrance towards its E. end low down in the wall. This wall stands to about 5 ft. and overhangs by about 9 ins. The other walls of the hut are poorly coursed and bonded.

It is clear that there was a connection between huts 3 and 4 but it is at present blocked by tumbled material which obscures most of hut 4. The walling round hut 4 is visible only around the S. end of the next in the series of connecting entrances. The roof of the hut has clearly fallen in. The hut was smaller than hut 3 and much nearer an oval form. The visible walling is roughly coursed and built of undressed stone, but this walling has clearly been weakened by the collapse of the roof and the connection with hut 5 has been completely blocked by material tumbled in from the S. end of hut 5 which is at a slightly higher level.

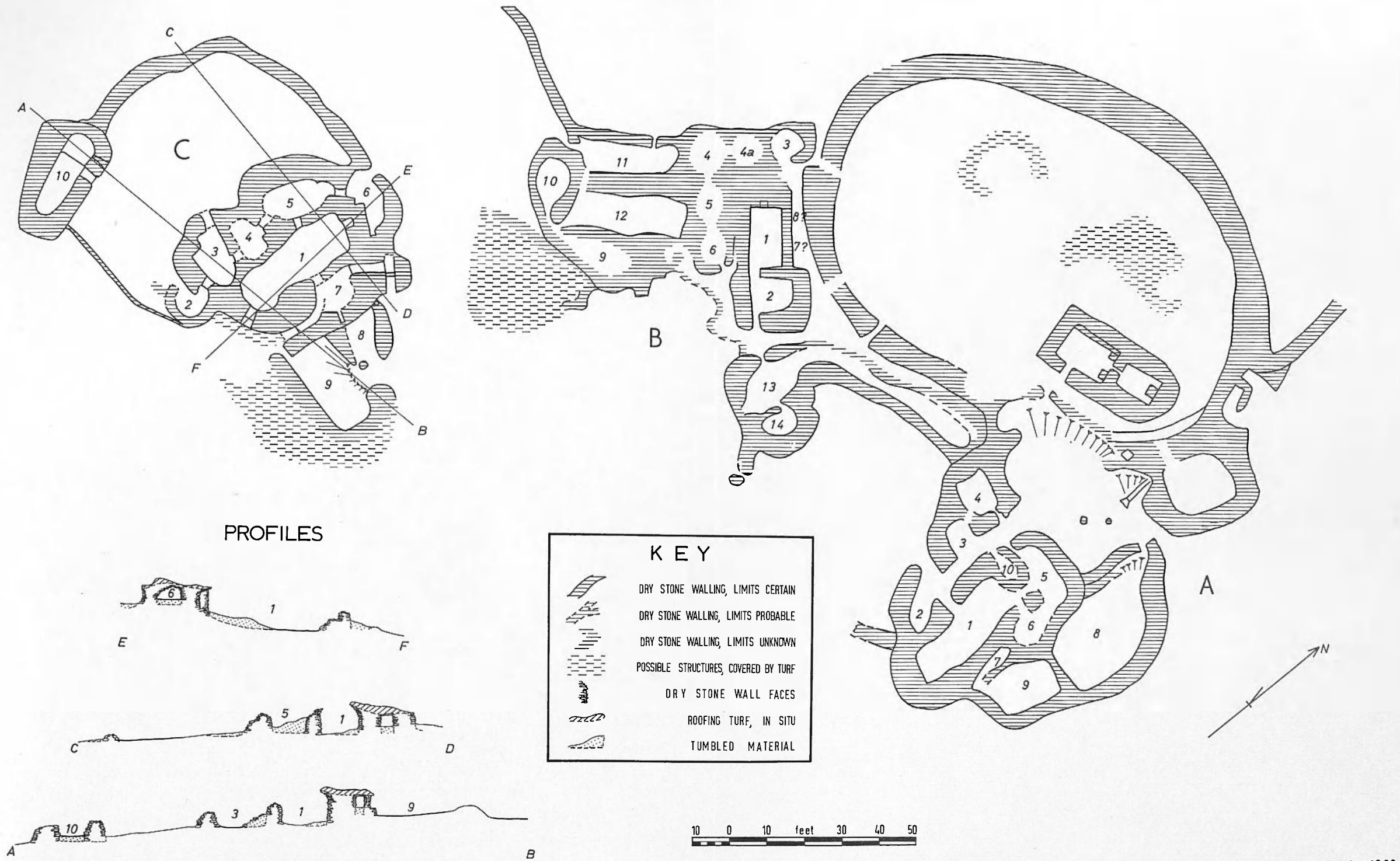
Hut 5 is again longer, oval in shape with an extension providing a lobby to the northern entrance. The hut is obscured by tumbled material at its S. end, and along the N.E. side N. of the entrance in the E. wall which leads to the central structure of the group. The W. wall is extremely thick (7 ft. at the base) and remains in reasonably good condition partly due to the bonding qualities of *armeria*. On the outer face, it has been broken into at the S.W. corner. The extension at the N. end of the hut retains a portion of the corbelled roof intact but the corbelling is now in poor condition. At its highest point, the roof is $3\frac{1}{2}$ ft. above the present surface which includes an undetermined thickness of debris. The entrance leading to hut 6 from the corbelled end is almost completely obscured by debris and it is certain that here the original floor was well below the present surface. Sufficient gaps remained to enable the edges of the entrance to be drawn on the plan with tolerable accuracy. It was obvious that it widened into hut 6.

Hut 6 is completely roofed, with the exception of a hole broken into the corbels near the entrance and through which the cell could be examined. The cell is roughly pear-shaped, but at the S.W. corner opposite the entrance in the outer wall is an almost right-angled embayment, and at the E. end is a recess, corbelled like the remainder of the cell, but very low, with the roof decreasing in height towards the back. This is 18-24 ins. wide and extends more than 2 ft. back into the walling. The walling inside the cell is well preserved and the profile in Fig. 1 gives an accurate idea of the interior profile of this cell. The outer face of the walling is well covered with turf and appears to be intact. The entrance giving direct access from outside is obscured by tumbled material. The corbelled roof is covered by a layer of turf, 9-18 ins. thick which has probably been added to at various stages. Out of this turfing, and also from the turf on other parts of the site, came some small sherds of pottery.

The walling at the N. end of the central structure must be extremely thick for no trace of another cell could be found. The embayment into the N. wall is possibly due to stone robbing at some period, for the wall has clearly been broken into and a break made into the head of the N.E. passage. This passage is right-angled with the possibility of a very shallow extension of the E.-W. limb westwards past the N. end of the other limb. In section the passage is almost square, with sides of about 3 ft., but there is an unknown thickness of debris on the floor. The side walls are vertical and well coursed. The roof consists of large flat slabs laid horizontally over the tops of the walls, and is intact over the N.-S. limb of the passage, but only two slabs are in place over the E.-W. member.

This passage leads into what seems to be an almost oval cell, hut 7, but the roof has fallen in and the limits of this hut are thus rather indeterminate. An equally narrow but longer recess, similar to that at the E. end of hut 6, exists at the S.E. corner and it is quite clear that this did not extend to the outer edge of the wall and is thus not an entrance of any description.

At the S. end of hut 7 is a southerly curved passage, otherwise similar to the northern one. Again, there is an unknown depth of debris on the floor. As well as leading to hut 7, this passage probably connected directly with the E. entrance to the central structure of the group. However, this end of the passage and the entrance concerned are both badly obscured by tumbled material. The walling S.W. of this passage is extremely thick and apparently solid. The roofing remains over the passage, except for the 5 ft. nearest the outer end, and is covered by about 12 ins. of turf which served to make the corbelled stone



mens. H.C.N. / R.A.G. 1958. del. R.A.G. 1960.

Fig. 1. Plan of the village area, North Rona

roofing wind and water proof. The curved line of the passage is continued around the S.E. edge of the group as a slightly raised platform which ends against the wall of hut 2. It is not clear whether this is cut into the natural sod or is stone built.

The E. wall of the group is almost straight, and while it remains intact to a height of about 2 ft. throughout its length, only at the N. end does it exist to a height in excess of this figure. At this end it is 4 ft. high and a projecting stone exists which is bonded into the bottom course. This stone is at the outer edge of a sod bank, 6-12 ins. high and slightly curved; also, from about halfway along this E. wall, another turf bank projects eastwards as shown on the plan. Adjacent to the S. end of the E. wall of the group is a depression, approximately 35 ft. long and varying between 8 and 11 ft. broad. On its N. side, is an inclined surface about 2 ft. wide leading from the depressed floor to the ground level above and outside. At its E. end, the depression is bounded inside by a well built stone face 4½ ft. high, but on top and on its outer face, this is well covered with turf; the total thickness of the wall here, at the base, is 10 ft. This wall round the depression merges and widens into a level platform, completely covered by turf, and the purpose of which is unknown, as is that of the depression.

W. of the main group is a small enclosure, sub-rectangular in shape, at the S.W. corner of which is another domestic structure, but of a different type. This building, which would appear to be the remains of a small primitive type of blackhouse, is almost rectangular with slightly rounded corners. The interior dimensions are 23 ft. by 7 ft. and the walls vary from 4 to 8 ft. thick. There is a pronounced thickening in the wall at the N.W. corner. The wall narrows upwards and neither face is vertical, but the batter on the outer face is much more pronounced than that on the inner. The walls are of roughly-coursed, undressed native stone and consist of two built faces separated by a rubble filling. The wall remains to an average height of about 5 ft. except at the N.W. and S.E. corners, where it has been broken down to less than 2 ft. In the E. wall are a door and window. The door, set off-centre in the wall, is very slightly narrower at the top than at the bottom and the lintel stones, two in number and about 2½ ft. long, are about 4½ ft. above the present surface. A large flat stone remains at the surface at the outer side of the entrance and a narrow threshold stone exists at the inner edge. There was probably a slight step down into the original house, but the floor is today covered by an unknown depth of tumbled material. North of the door is a small window opening, its outside measurements being 12 ins. high and 18 ins. wide, but it narrows to a square opening 12 ins. wide at the inner face of the wall. Inside, at the N. end of the house, there is a platform, flush with the north edge of the door, 18 ins. high and bounded by a well-built wall. This is very over-grown and it is not clear whether it is a platform or a partition wall one side of which has for some reason been filled in by debris, and not the other.

The S. and S.E. edge of the enclosure is marked by a distinct drop in level as between the surface inside and that outside. The difference in level is 40 ins. at the E. end and 30 ins. at the W. end and the face of this drop has been supported by a single thickness of walling now well covered by turf but breached in one place near the blackhouse. This wall continues above the inner surface so that it averages a height outside the enclosure of about 3½ ft., rising to a maximum of 4 ft. This walling is not bonded into the walling of the blackhouse.

The walling around the remainder of the enclosure is quite different. Normally 4 to 5 ft. thick at the base and narrowing rapidly upwards, both faces are sloping and covered by *armeria* tussocks, particularly on the inner side. Rising in places to 3½ ft., the average height of the wall is about 3 ft. It seems to consist of a well built stone outer face and a stone, or stone and sod, inner face but the latter is so covered over with vegetation that it is difficult to discover its exact nature. The wall forms a dog-leg, along the N. limb of which, visible on the outer face especially, is walling of a different character. With orthostats up to 2 ft. high, the wall here is not so clearly reinforced with turf and sod, while the spaces between orthostats have been filled in with flat stones of variable size laid horizontally; also, the wall here is thinner than elsewhere. The ground level inside is some 10 ins. higher than that outside. At the E. end, this wall displays no apparent discontinuity with the walling of the group of corbelled structures, but at its S. end, the wall has been splayed out against the N. end of the blackhouse, but not bonded into it.

THE ECCLESIASTICAL STRUCTURES

The Cashel is an oval enclosure situated on the N., uphill, side of the village. Its internal measurements are 105 ft. (E.-W.) and 62 ft. (N.-S.), and it is incomplete in the S.E., where there is direct access to the church from the domestic group A. There is a well made entrance 18 ins. wide towards the W. end of the S. side. The church is placed in the extreme S.E. of the enclosure, its walls standing high above ground level in marked contrast to the sunken character of the domestic buildings; it thus holds a dominating position, although situated close to the dwellings (Pl. XVA).

The boundary of the cashel is a massive flat-topped wall ranging from 2 to 6 ft. in height above interior ground level, and varying from 5 to over 10 ft. in width at the base. Over the N. arc the level of the ground outside, which has been cultivated, is 1—2 ft. above the level within the boundary wall, probably due less to soil-creep than to liberal applications of manure. The sloping sides of the wall are faced with stones averaging about 12 × 4 ins. on their exposed faces, and the flat top is thickly covered in turf. In addition to the entrance mentioned above, the wall has been breached in antiquity in two places adjacent to the domestic group B. This structural complex is built close against the cashel wall, and in its original form may have been contemporary with it (see p. 112 below). There is a strong suggestion that group A also is founded upon, and partially embodies, the remains of structures associated with an early ecclesiastical settlement.

There are no stone structures other than the church now visible within the cashel. Two obscure mounds to the N. of the church may be the remains of early cells.¹

The area to the W. and S.W. of the church is largely occupied by burials, marked by small headstones, some of which are roughly cross-shaped; a representative selection is illustrated in Fig. 4. On the S. side the cashel wall has been partially demolished to accommodate burials, and immediately in front of the church it cannot be definitely traced. At a distance of 3 ft. S. of the church doorway are traces of a dry-stone wall 18 ins. thick and built of small dressed slabs, with a neatly squared-off end which suggests a second entrance to the cashel at this point. The masonry, however, is out of character with that of the cashel wall as a whole.

Eight feet N.W. of the N.W. corner of the church the edges of several large slabs, with small cavities beneath them, can be detected at the surface, but their structural relationship cannot be determined without excavation. It is possible that these may be the remains of a slab-built grave or shrine of early date, such as are known at Saint Ninian's Isle, Shetland,² at Papil, Shetland,³ and at

¹ Some confusion has arisen in the account of the cashel given in the Ancient Monuments Inventory for the *Outer Hebrides, Skye and the Small Isles* (Introd. p. xlvi), which states that a number of circular cells remain standing within the enclosure. This description should in fact apply to Sgor nam Ban-naomha, Canna (no. 679 of the Inventory).

² A. C. O'Dell. *Antiquity* (1959), Vol. XXXIII, p. 242.

³ J. Stewart. *P.S.A.S.* (1944), LXXVIII, p. 92.

numerous Irish localities, for example, Kildrenagh¹ and Beginish², Co. Kerry. Curving around the E. end of the church is a structure having the appearance of a stone-built drain, while nearby occur several basin-like hollows, one of which is designated on the six inch O.S. map as a well.

The Church (Figs. 2 and 3)

The church itself is a two-chambered building. Before the visit to North Rona, it was observed that the plan of this building in the Ancient Monuments Inventory did not correspond to that published by Muir.³ In particular, the re-entrant right angle at the junction of the oratory and the nave, as in the Royal Commission plan, is absent from Muir's plan. Although much of the exterior is obscured by fallen stone, it was found that Muir's plan is more nearly correct, and that in its original condition the nave was symmetrically placed relative to the oratory.

Three constructional periods can be distinguished in the church:

1. The building of the oratory, generally referred to as 'Saint Ronan's Cell'.
2. The addition of a larger chamber to the W. end of the oratory, forming the nave of the complete church.
3. Repair and reconstruction of the nave.

To these may be added as a fourth period the repairs to the S. wall and doorway of the nave carried out by Dr. F. Fraser Darling in 1938.⁴ This work has been so skilfully accomplished that it might well pass undetected.

The Oratory

The structural simplicity and solidity of the oratory, and its remote situation, have contributed towards its survival as a unique monument of Celtic Christianity in Scotland.

Externally, its appearance is that of a dome-like mound of stones and turf (Pl. XVA). Formerly the inhabitants of the island kept the entire structure turfed over, but most of this cover has been eroded off. Only half the height of the walls stands above present ground level, but there is no evidence that the building was originally sunk in the ground. The foundation of the wall is not seen and its thickness cannot be estimated. In the upper, exposed part, the wall is only one or two stones thick. The E. end of the oratory was breached and one of the roofing-slabs removed by an Ordnance Survey party in 1850; otherwise the structure is intact.

The present floor, which has been taken as datum plane for internal measurements, is 9 to 12 ins. below the unexcavated floor level of the nave, as defined by Dr. Darling's retaining wall. It is an artificial floor resulting from

¹ F. Henry. *P.R.I.A.* (1956), Vol. 58, p. 88.

² Henry, *loc. cit.*, p. 55.

³ Muir (1861 and 1885), *op. cit.*

⁴ Darling, *op. cit.*

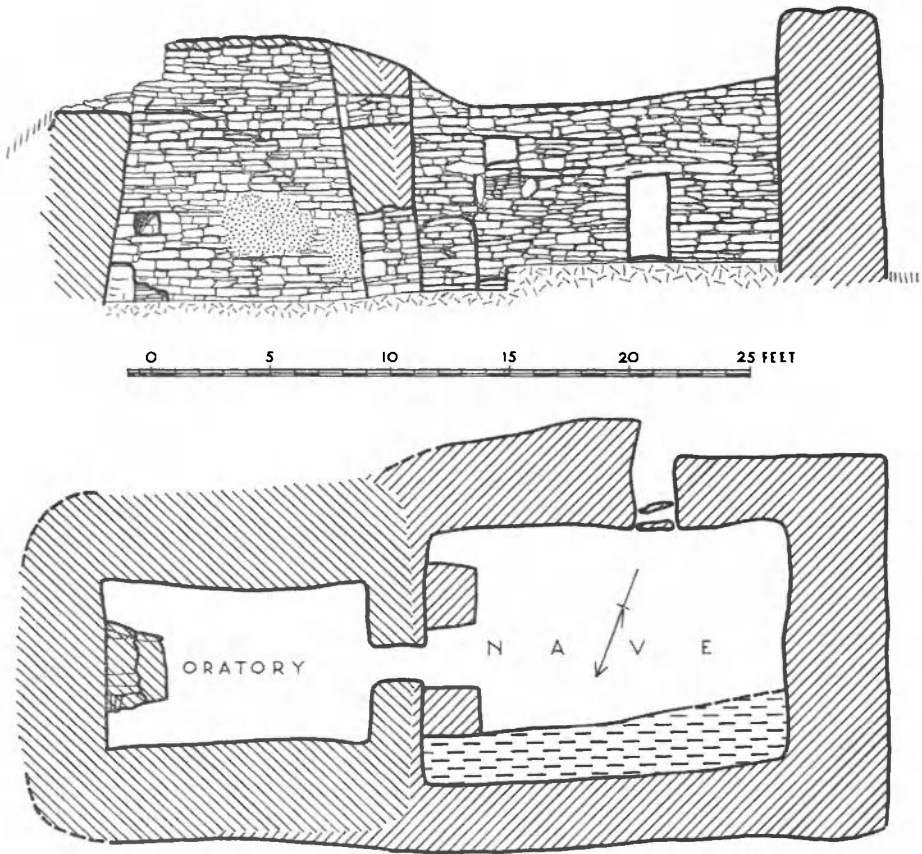


Fig. 2. Plan and Section of the Church

partial excavation and subsequent re-silting; the original floor is estimated to be at least 12 ins. lower. Comment on the recorded excavations will be made below, p. 108.

The internal plan of the oratory has been distorted by inward sagging of the walls, a feature common in corbelled structures built to a rectangular plan.¹ The overall length is 11 ft. 2 ins., the length of the W. wall, 6 ft. 9 ins., and of the E. wall, 7 ft. 3 ins.; the distance between the N. and S. walls at their mid-points is only 6 ft. 3 ins. The E. and W. walls are straight throughout their height, sloping inward at angles of 80° and 78° to the horizontal respectively. The longer N. and S. walls have suffered pronouncedly from sagging and cracking, but appear to have been originally straight at least in their lower parts. The upper 4 ft. have a slight inward curve. These walls now converge at angles of 70° and 76° respectively. At roof level a gap 1 ft. 9 ins. wide is spanned by five large transverse slabs. There must originally have been six such

¹ H. G. Leask. *Irish Churches and Monastic Buildings* (1955), Vol. I, pp. 23, 26.

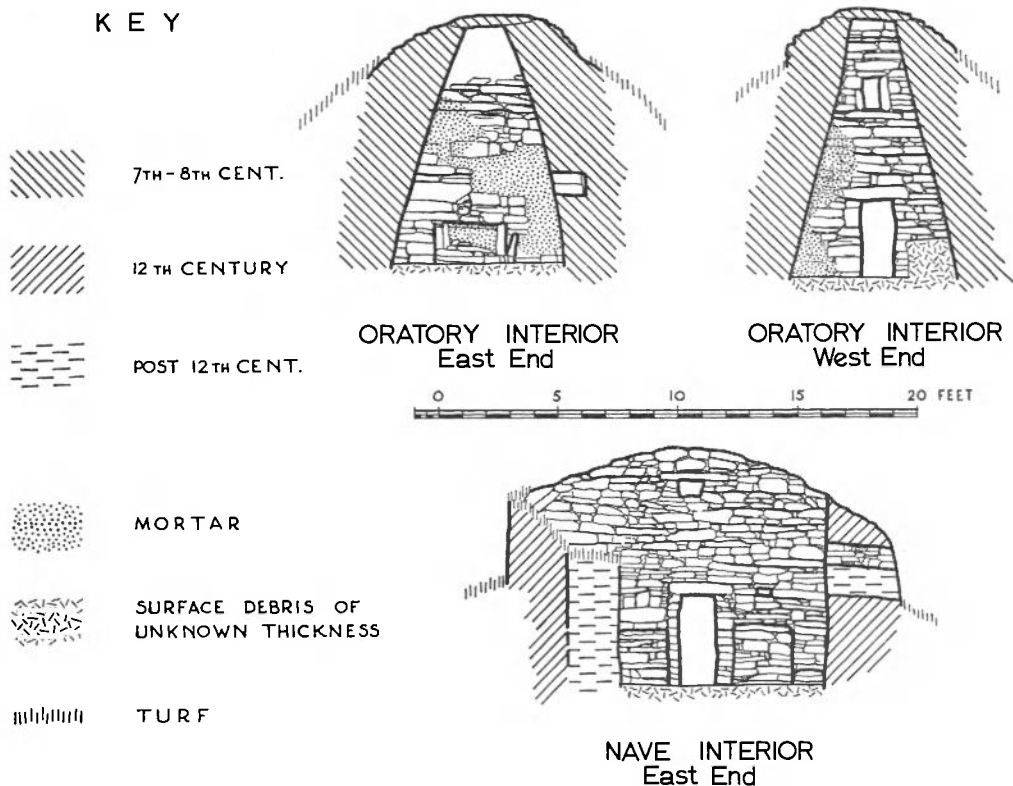


Fig. 3. Cross sections of the Church

slabs, but the most easterly one has been displaced. The slabs are not laid perfectly horizontal, but incline slightly to the N., presumably as a device for shedding rain-water. The vertical internal height from present floor to roofing slabs is 10 ft. 6 ins., giving an estimated original height of 11 ft. 6 ins. to 12 ft.

The E. wall rises 7 ft. 6 ins. to the breach. There is no record of an E. window ever having been present, and if there had been one it would hardly have been necessary to break down the wall to obtain a view of the interior. The altar is situated squarely in the centre of this wall and in contact with it. It is 1 ft. 8 ins. high, 1 ft. 6 ins. deep, and 3 ft. wide, including two vertically set slabs at either side (Pl. XVI B). The top consists of two stones, and no slab was found which could have fulfilled the role of a single top-stone. In front of it is a step, in poor condition. Since the internal structure of the altar is unknown, it is not possible to quote a precise parallel, but fair comparison may be made with the altar of Knock-e-Doonee, Isle of Man¹, which is dated to about the 6th century. The altar was repaired in 1938 by Dr. Darling, who found a large pebble of Iona marble in close proximity to it. 3 ft. 2 ins. above the S. corner of the altar, a small wooden peg with a hole bored through it is inserted in the wall.

¹ *Manx Archaeological Survey, Report No. 3 (1911), p. 26, fig. 24.*

In the S. wall of the oratory is an aumbry 1 ft. 2 ins. wide, 1 ft. 1 in. high, and 1 ft. 6 ins. deep, situated at a height of 3 ft. from the present floor and at a distance of 1 ft. 6 ins. from the S.E. corner. It can hardly be a blocked-up window, as implied on Muir's plan. Other recesses in this wall appear to have resulted from the removal of stones in relatively recent times.

The doorway, in the W. wall, is 3 ft. 6 ins. in height above the present floor, and 1 ft. 6 ins. wide at the bottom. The jambs lean slightly outward, so that the doorway is 3 ins. wider at the top than at floor level. There are two flat lintel stones, with a gap between them which might have accommodated a third before the addition of the nave. Directly above the door is a small window, its sill being 6 ft. 10 ins. above present floor level. It is 1 ft. 6 ins. high, 9 ins. wide, flat-headed, and neatly built, becoming lower, wider and more irregular on the outside.

The masonry is uniformly neat; the large stones have been freshly split along the joint planes, and their flat edges laid evenly. Packing is provided by small spalls laid horizontally, or occasionally vertically or obliquely. The angles of the walls are very poorly bonded, as though the technique of constructing a rectangular building had not been fully mastered. All the stone is coarse-grained gneiss native to the island.

The interior of the oratory and its altar have been thickly daubed with a cream-coloured shell-lime mortar, patches of which still adhere to the walls. On the E. wall two layers can be detected: the lower, a pinkish, gritty variety containing a proportion of clay, has been applied with the fingers, while the upper, of a finer, softer texture, bears a pattern of twirls and concentric oval rings as though some pointed implement had been used. If Iain MacKays' story is correct (p. 92), the later mortar cannot be more than 150 years old, although the practice of decorating churches in this way is of very ancient standing.

The Nave

The exterior ground plan of the nave is difficult to determine precisely due to fallen stone. It measures 16 ft. by 23 ft. approximately, its east wall being also the west wall of the oratory. The relationship of oratory and nave is obscured on the S. side; on the N. side the outer face of the nave wall has been continued for a short distance along the wall of the oratory. The masonry of the nave is poor relative to that of the oratory, the stones being less regular and the use of packing less skilful. The wall has an inner and an outer facing of slabs and a core of looser, smaller stones.

The W. wall is nearly 5 ft. thick, and stands to a height of 10 ft. at the gable. Its corners are well and substantially built. The upper part of this wall now sags outward. The original N. wall stands 2 ft. above outside ground level and is 3 ft. thick. The S. wall, 6 ft. 6 ins. in height, is 3 ft. thick at the top, but thicker and rather variable at ground level. The doorway, which is slightly

E. of the middle of this wall, was rebuilt by Dr. F. Fraser Darling. It is 3 ft. 6 ins. high, with three long lintel-slabs; the jambs, which are without checks, have an outward batter, and the entrance-way curves but maintains an even width of 1 ft. 9 ins. On the inner side of the doorway are two kerbs formed of slabs set on edge. The E. jamb projects, at ground level, 1 ft. beyond the other, and between the door and the window the wall curves curiously. The window, also in the S. wall, is about 1 ft. 3 ins. square, and the stonework about it is rather haphazard. Viewed from the inside, this window, which is 2 ft. from the junction of the E. and S. walls, is seen to represent only the upper part of an aperture which has been partially blocked with small stones. This aperture has been about 3 ft. in height and might have served as a door when, as in Muir's time, the floor was some 2 ft. above its present level, and the side-altars were not visible at all.

At some time the rather flimsy N. wall has sagged inwards, causing several large foundation stones to project on the outside. To prop up this sagging wall a subsidiary wall has been built, 2 ft. thick and standing 3 to 4 ft. above present floor level. The subsidiary wall fills the space between the original wall and the N. side-altar, and is not bonded into the E. wall.

The E. wall of the nave is slightly concave, this feature being more noticeable in its upper than in its lower part. Bonding with the N. and S. walls is poor. Gable height is 10 ft. above present floor level. Access to the oratory—now the sanctuary—is gained through the original doorway (Pl. XVIIA); the S. jamb of this doorway is stepped 4 ins. forward into the nave. Two stone altars are built against the E. wall of the nave, one on either side of the oratory doorway. Both are neatly built, standing to a height of 2 ft. 4 ins. above the present artificial floor level, and the S. altar bears in addition an irregularly oval slab which may not be the original top-stone. The N. and S. altars are 2 ft. 5 ins. and 2 ft. 2 ins. square respectively. 1 ft. 3 ins. above the top of the S. altar is a recess 6 ins. wide by 4 ins. high, and 12 ins. deep. The two altars and the lower part of the wall have been daubed with pinkish shelly mortar.

The original form of the gables is uncertain. If the original roof was steeply pitched, as analogy with Irish medieval churches suggests, it must have been an extremely unstable dry-stone structure, and cannot have stood for long. In later times the nave almost certainly had a thatched roof. Several irregularly-spaced recesses in the walls could have supported wooden beams. The addition of the nave to the oratory has been skilfully accomplished by partial demolition of the outer face of the oratory's W. wall. The doorway and the window show signs of reconstruction, and a partial bonding of the angles has been achieved. Externally the junction is largely obscured by tumbled material and turf.

Excavations

One hundred years ago, according to T. S. Muir, the doorway of the nave was 3 ft. 5 ins. in height; east of it was 'a small window of the same shape'.

The paired altars in the nave, however, were not seen, the entrance to the oratory was only about 18 ins. high, and within it, only the top-stone of the altar was visible.

Since that time several unofficial excavations have taken place. In 1936 Atkinson¹ dug out some debris from the oratory and reached clay, which he considered to be boulder-clay brought from Lewis. In 1938 Darling² excavated the nave, and found the two altars. 'It was evident that a clay floor had been beaten into position . . . a few inches below the top of these pillars'. Beneath the clay was a thick layer of sand. This material must have been transported over the hill from Fianuis, the N. peninsula; but who undertook this labour, when, and why, is not known. 4 ft. 4 ins. below the door-lintel there was a paved floor, not now visible, on which were found gannet and seal bones, some partially charred. There was a small step down into the oratory, where Dr. Darling cleared the altar, and found a paved area in front of it. Only a small area adjacent to the N. wall of the oratory now remains undisturbed. Further excavation alone can decide whether or not the pavings described are original. It may be mentioned here that such excavation could not safely be carried out without some apparatus for shoring up the existing walls, particularly in the oratory.

Teampull nam Manach

Before this section of the report is concluded, a little should be said of the mysterious Teampull nam Manach, mentioned by T. S. Muir.³ After Saint Ronan, according to Muir's informant, the island was occupied by Roman Catholics, who built, outside the graveyard and 15 yards from the E. end of the present Church, a chapel called Teampull nam Manach, 'with an altar in the middle, 4 feet square by 3 feet high, and having a round gray stone on the top'. Part of it was said to have been destroyed '400 years since' (*i.e.* about 1450 A.D., if taken literally), but the altar and some of the walling still stood in 1800. Stewart⁴ has suggested a date in the region of 1250 A.D. for this destruction.

If the position indicated, 15 yards E. of the oratory, is accurate, Teampull nam Manach is now buried under several cultivation ridges. Some 15 feet E. of the oratory, however, against the outside of the cashel wall, is an enclosure which seems to be separate from the domestic group A. (Fig. 1, unnumbered.) It is about 15 ft. square internally, bounded by a thick turf and stone wall in which no definite entrance could be detected, and it may conceivably be identifiable as Teampull nam Manach, although not oriented. The enclosed area is filled with a mass of loose, bare stones, as though it had been used as a dump for rubbish in relatively recent times, perhaps during the excavations in the church.

¹ Atkinson, *op. cit.*

² Darling, *op. cit.*

³ Muir (1861), *op. cit.*

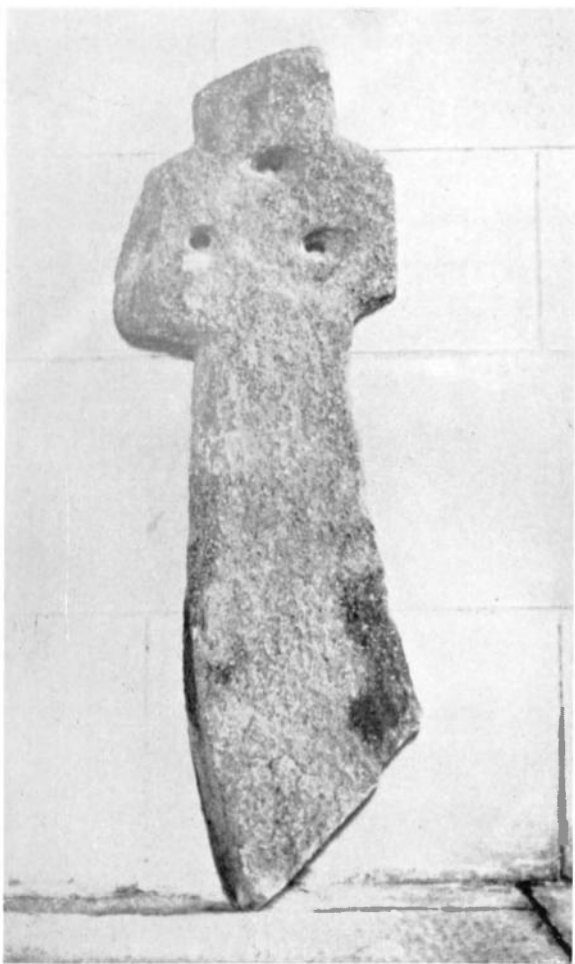
⁴ M. Stewart. *Ronay* (1933).



A. The E. end of the nave, showing the side altars and entrance to the oratory



B. The altar in the oratory, North Rona



A. Medieval cross from North Rona, now at
Teampull Mholuidh, Eorpie, Ness
(*Photograph by Malcolm Stewart*)



B. 8th-century cross-slab in the church, North Rona

SCULPTURED STONES

Worked stones now visible on the island comprise:—

- (i) numerous querns, many of which have been incorporated in the fabric of the domestic buildings;
- (ii) fragments of three stone bowls, now deposited in the nave of the church;
- (iii) one door-swivel;
- (iv) about 25 headstones, some *in situ* in the graveyard, others distributed around the dwellings;
- (v) a large slab bearing a pecked-out cross design, incorporated in the subsidiary N. wall of the nave.

The stones in groups (iv) and (v) only need be discussed. The Ness Shepherds' Stone is included in group (iv). Most of the other stones in this group are small and undistinguished; many have been roughly cross-shaped, but are badly weathered. A representative selection is illustrated (Fig. 4, nos. 1-7). The stones are of a general type common in the Outer Hebrides, and need not be older than the later days of the 'Ancient Race' (16th-17th century). Nos. 8 and 9 in Fig. 4 seem to belong to an earlier period. No. 8, found by officers of the Nature Conservancy in June, 1958, is a disc-headed slab of Norse type, bearing a deeply-pecked, simple Latin cross, whose transverse arms, and probably also the top limb, have reached the edge of the slab. No. 9 seems originally to have been in the shape of a cross with short, broad arms, and bears the faint remnants of a plain Latin cross carved in relief. A rather similar, rune-inscribed stone from Caithness has been firmly dated as not later than 1231 A.D., and possibly 12th century.¹

A cross which may be mentioned here is the pierced slab figured by Muir.² This stone (Pl. XVIIA) formerly stood in the graveyard on North Rona, where it was much venerated by the natives. Between the years 1931 and 1936 it was taken to Lewis, and is now at Teampull Mholuidh, Eoropie. It is a thin slab of gneiss carved in the shape of a cross with short, stubby arms, pierced at the crossing of the arms with three holes arranged in an equilateral triangle. A similarly-shaped cross, with a lozenge pattern of four holes, has been described from Balnahard, Colonsay.³ If, as seems probable, the type is derived from the sculptured wheel-headed cross, the three-holed type is later than that with four holes. This cross, as well as nos. 8 and 9, described above, may date from the 12th or 13th century.

Stone (v) (Pl. XVIIIB) is a thin slab of flaky grey biotite-gneiss, 3 ft. 10 ins. high, 1 ft. 8 ins. wide at the top which is slightly curved, tapering to 1 ft. 4 ins. at the bottom. In the centre of the upper half of one face is a moderately deeply-pecked Latin cross with the shaft longer than the arms and slightly expanded

¹ J. Anderson. *P.S.A.S.* (1897), Vol. XXXI, p. 293.

² Muir (1861), *op. cit.*

³ J. Romilly Allen. *Early Christian Monuments of Scotland* (1903), p. 380, fig. 395.

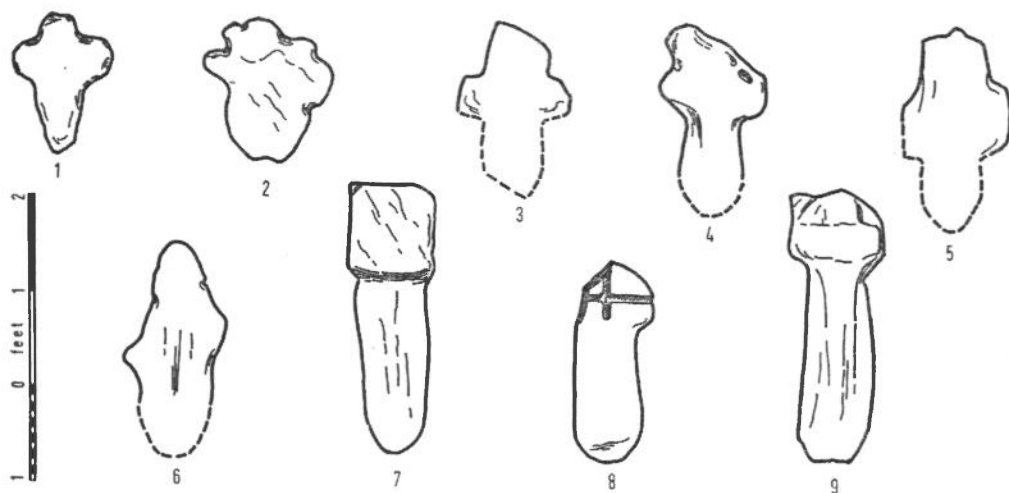


Fig. 4. Selection of headstones in the graveyard

terminals. This type of cross is not uncommon: compare, for example, the small, rather crude crosses on Eileach an Naoimh¹; the cross on one of the supporting pillars of the shrine at Papil, Shetland²; the incised 'Mailfataric' cross of Iona³, which has, however, much more strongly expanded terminals. The cross on Rona is matched in all respects except that of size by a pecked cross on a slab of slate from Eileach an Naoimh⁴, a site strongly associated with St. Columba. Parallels are readily found in Wales, where broad criteria have been established for the dating of early Christian monuments. The Rona cross belongs to Nash-Williams' Group II, and typologically it falls between no. 172 and no. 260, both of which are dated 7th-9th century⁵.

DISCUSSION

In the following pages an attempt is made to date the various structures now seen on North Rona, and to provide, as far as possible, a continuous history of the island.

During the course of the survey several sherds of pottery were picked up in the village, having apparently weathered out of the turf with which the buildings were formerly covered. Mr. R. B. K. Stevenson has kindly contributed a note on this pottery (Appendix), but it has proved too fragmentary to be of datable value. No evidence can be advanced for the existence of a pre-Christian population on the island.

¹ T. H. Bryce and G. A. F. Knight. *Trans. Glasgow Arch. Soc.* (1933), N.S. Vol. 8.

² J. Stewart. *P.S.A.S.* (1944), LXXVIII.

³ Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 400, fig. 417.

⁴ Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 402, fig. 420.

⁵ V. E. Nash-Williams. *The Early Christian Monuments of Wales* (1950).

The oratory is undoubtedly the oldest building now standing on North Rona. It bears a general resemblance to many early Irish oratories, but Scottish parallels are less readily found. In the Hebrides the only comparable entire structure is the Flannan Islands Chapel, to which no date has been assigned, and which has been largely rebuilt in relatively recent times. It is smaller overall, has no window, and the walls are of more orthodox corbelling; its length : breadth proportions are almost identical with those of the building on Rona, *i.e.* 1.57:1.¹

A more appropriate comparison may be made with some of the Irish oratories, such as Skellig Michael nos. 1 and 2,² and Gallarus oratory, Co. Kerry³—all simple corbelled structures built to a rectangular plan. Gallarus oratory, although larger and more sophisticated, has two features in common with the Rona oratory: it has been pointed internally with mortar, and the side walls have sagged inward. The cross-section of the Rona oratory is also closely matched by that of a 'rectangular clochan' built against the cashel wall at Ardillaun, Co. Galway.⁴ This clochan is 8 ft. long by 7 ft. wide, with straight walls 5 ft. thick converging to a height of 9 ft., where the gap is closed with large flags.

The length : breadth proportion of the Rona oratory, only a little over 1.5:1, may in itself be indicative of an early date.⁵ It is noteworthy that the Rona oratory is higher in proportion to its breadth than any of the buildings mentioned above. The estimated height of the doorway, 4 ft. 6 ins. at a maximum, does not seem abnormally small; compare Skellig no. 2, in which it is only 3 ft. 3 ins.

The oratory on North Rona can thus be classed with the earliest recognisable Christian buildings in the British Isles. An upper limit for its date is set by the statement of Dicuil, writing *c.* 820 A.D., that by his time the Norse raids had caused many hermitages to be deserted. Allowing a sufficient time-lapse for the spread of Christianity from Iona to such a remote locality, an 8th or even 7th-century date for the oratory may be accepted. The early cross-slab (Pl. XVIIb), strengthens this conclusion, and emphasises the association with Iona.

The oratory must have served as a place of devotion for a holy man, or community of holy men, living on Rona in the Dark Ages. The extreme remoteness of the site argues against its having been a monastery; more probably it was a hermitage, a 'solitude in the pathless sea', as Adamnan had it, for men seeking to purify their souls through penitential exile. The monastery from which they came was probably in Lewis, and a close association with Teampull Ronaidh at Eoropie seems likely. The original appearance of the cashel would have been similar to that of Inishmurray, as reconstructed by Leask,⁶ although on a smaller scale. Simple dwelling-huts, now all but obliterated, stood within

¹ Roy, *Comm. Ancient and Historical Monuments, Scotland, Outer Hebrides, Skye and the Small Isles* (1928).

² Leask, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

³ Leask, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁴ G. H. Kinahan. *P.R.I.A.* (1869), p. 551.

⁵ Leask, *op. cit.* p. 49 *et seq.*

⁶ Leask, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

the enclosure, and the possible site of a slab-built grave-shrine N.W. of the church has been mentioned; gravestones and probably one or more free-standing cross-slabs would complete the picture. No field evidence has been found for agriculture or stock-keeping in this early period, but it seems impossible that the community could have been other than self-supporting.

The problem of Teampull nam Manach must remain unsolved. The oral evidence implies that it antedated the nave, and was subsequently abandoned in favour of a two-chambered church, but the dates suggested are unreliable. Even the identification of its site is by no means certain, and this point might profitably be investigated in any future excavation programme.

The added nave was certainly used in conjunction with the oratory, and the pattern which emerges, that of a two-chambered church with a high altar in the chancel and a pair of side-altars in the nave, is a familiar one for churches of the 12th century in Norse areas. The Norse cathedral at Birsay, Orkney,¹ the 12th-century church at Saint Ninian's Isle, Shetland,² the cathedral at Gardar, Greenland, and Olafskyrke at Trondhjem, are cases in point. The church on Rona is less pretentious in its architecture than the examples quoted; it differs also in having the doorway in the S. wall instead of the W.

Mr. Radford has suggested³ that the addition, in the early 12th century, of the two altars in the nave of the cathedral at Birsay implies an increase in the numbers of the ecclesiastical community. Such may also have been the case on Rona when Teampull nam Manach was abandoned and the nave was built. Each priest in the community would have his own dwelling in the form of a Norse longhouse, and it is almost certain that the domestic groups A and B, both of which have direct access to the church enclosure, had their origins in the residences of the 12th-century clergy. The fair state of preservation of group C, and its more highly developed system of passages, suggest that it is more recent than the other two groups, but the possibility that it too may be of 12th-century origin cannot be excluded.

North Rona in the 12th-13th centuries must have been a place of some importance. Although parish churches were built commonly enough on peninsulas and islands, Rona seems too remote for the church to have served any community other than that resident on the island. As a pilgrimage-spot, however, it would have provided an exacting test of a man's devotion, not to mention his navigation, and the sanctity conferred on the spot by the Celtic oratory would be a factor in favour of its choice as the site of a Norse church. The evidence of the 12th-13th century crosses indicates that the cashel was used as a burial-ground during the Christian Norse period.

The passing of the Norse ecclesiastical community and the development of the 16th-17th century economy of thirty people who spoke 'only Irish'⁴ are unrecorded. The ecclesiastical community as such probably came to an end

¹ C. A. R. Radford. *The Early Christian and Norse Settlements, Birsay* (Ministry of Works Official Guide, 1959), p. 12.

² A. C. O'Dell. *Antiquity* (1959), Vol. XXXIII, p. 242.

³ Radford, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁴ M. Martin. *Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (c. 1695).

with the collapse of Norse rule in the islands in the late 13th century, but tradition was to some extent maintained; four centuries later the 'Ancient Race' still used the altered and extended houses of their predecessors, worshipped in their church, and treated at least one visitor as a 'pilgrim'.¹

The alterations to the nave mentioned in the descriptive section must post-date the Norse Christian period and antedate Muir's visit in 1857. The N. wall was propped up, the floor was levelled with sand topped by a layer of clay, and a new doorway was constructed at a higher level than the old. Presumably the original stone roof had collapsed and covered the earlier floor with debris. The building may have been put to some secular use, whether as house, barn, or byre, but it is too small to have served as a two-storey dwelling, with both entrances in use, as was the case at Eynhallow, Orkney.²

Treated on their own merits, without the supporting evidence of the church, the domestic structures present complex problems in dating and interpretation. Group B at least is no earlier than the building of the cashel wall, but is conceivably contemporaneous with it. Each group suggests a sub-rectangular structure around which was grouped a number of small circular or oval huts which are either contemporaneous or later. The relationship between the sub-rectangular and oval or circular huts is not clear, and will only be established by excavation. It is tentatively suggested that A₁ and possibly C₁, together with the presumed precursor of B₁, the 'manse', are analogous to the Viking houses at Birsay, described by Radford,³ and that the corbelled cells flanking these are later, possibly 15th-17th centuries. No exact parallel for a group of domestic structures such as those on North Rona seems to exist, to judge from available literature, and it seems best to interpret them as an amalgamation of Viking houses of the Birsay type and Hebridean corbelled huts, such as those described by Capt. Thomas.⁴ It is difficult to visualise the roofing of the rectangular houses, for the ends at least, to judge from the evidence of A₁ and C₁, were corbelled. On the other hand, with the stone available on North Rona, not to mention the span involved, it is difficult to believe that these houses were roofed completely by corbelling. It is possible that while the ends were covered in this way the middle remained open, or had a timber-framed (sod-covered?) roof, supported by posts. Here again excavation might provide further evidence.

The small blackhouse-type structure associated with group C has clear parallels, both in general form, and in individual detail such as the thickness of the walls, with Hebridean blackhouses. Its closest analogy would appear to be with the older type of sheiling huts in the district of Ness, some of which are still in use seasonally. Such dwellings were common in the 19th century in Lewis as sheilings, and possibly also as permanent dwellings at the beginning of that century (*e.g.* the 'sean bhaile' in Fivepenny Borve, Barvas). This building may fairly safely be attributed to some of the 19th-century occupants

¹ Martin, *op. cit.*

² Roy, *Comm. Ancient and Historical Monuments, Scotland, Orkney and Shetland*, Vol. II, p. 230.

³ Radford, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-23.

⁴ F. W. L. Thomas, *P.S.A.S.* Vol. 7 (1866-68), pp. 153-195.

of the island, possibly even as late as the two Ness shepherds of the 1880's, though it is more likely that it belongs to the mid-19th century, and may be the house of Donald MacLeod, the 'King' of Rona.

The 'manse' is, to say the least, enigmatic. No similar structure is known to exist in N. Lewis. The feature of straight gables is, in Highland peasant architecture, confined to the S.W. Highlands, particularly Argyll. It is difficult to believe that a native of Ness could have built such a house, coming from a district where the exclusive peasant tradition was one of thick-walled hip-ended houses. The existence of a chimney within the thickness of one gable marks it off as almost certainly of 19th-century origin, if not later. The earliest mention of this building, surely remarkable in comparison to the other domestic structures, is by the Duchess of Bedford in 1914,¹ who refers to it quite casually, as though the name was well-established. The present writers are unable to present a convincing argument as to the probable origin and date of this building, except to claim that it is demonstrably later than the corbelled structures of group B. From its excellent state of repair it would appear to be the latest house on the island, for roofing and repairing it would be less trouble than building a new house, for example in the case of the Ness Shepherds, supposing it to have been in existence before 1884. Even at the present day it is intermittently occupied by visitors, and used for the deposit of rubbish.

The sherds of pottery found in and around the village are of little assistance in dating, either on account of their small size or because of their lack of recognisable characteristics. The pieces of 'craggan ware' could be of almost any date from medieval times on; indeed craggans were still being made in Uig, N. Skye, in the 1920's.

The cultivated area was added to at least once, on the N.W. perimeter. Apart from this, the fragment suggestive of a drain found beneath the cultivation ridges to the N.E. of the village, and running diagonally under them, hints at two major phases in cultivation methods. The earlier involved cultivation of ground drained by widely-spaced shallow drains, stone-lined, and some of this remains immediately S. of the village. This was superseded by cultivation in high, narrower ridges, relatively widely spaced. This latter technique finds a parallel in the township of Eoropie in Ness, where, from oral evidence, the ridges were in use until the early 19th century at least. They were used for growing grain as well as for the potatoes more usually associated with this mode of cultivation. The reasons for, and chronological distinction if any, of the more regularly shaped cultivation ridges in the small enclosure on the N.W. side of the village, are not known.

In summary, the survey has largely confirmed the oral and written traditions concerning the island, although many problems await investigation by excavation. The earliest recognisable phase of occupation is the Celtic Christian period, 7th-8th centuries A.D., while almost solely on the basis of parallels

¹ Duchess of Bedford. *Ann. Mag. Scot. Nat. Hist.* (1914), p. 179.

from Birsay and N. Lewis, the domestic structures of North Rona suggest occupation by a small community from Viking times until the 19th century, with certain documented interruptions, particularly during the 18th century.

APPENDIX

NOTES ON THE POTTERY

By R. B. K. Stevenson

None of the sherds found are wheel turned, nor are they decorated or burnished. So there are few diagnostic features and even their relative dating is uncertain. One large piece, 8, seems definitely to be from a plain globular craggan (though there is only the base of the slightly everted upturned rim) such as were still made in the 19th century. The shape probably changed little for many centuries, while there is little to differentiate the fabric from that of the decorated pottery from the wheelhouses, etc. of the 1st millennium A.D. Sherds 1 and 16 probably go with 8. They differ little in texture, however, from 4, 10, and 13 which seem to go with 14, a rounded rim sherd which might come from a straight-sided pot but equally might be from a globular vessel with unusually upright lip. It is not really datable though it could perhaps be pre-Norse. Sherd 15 is of similar fabric, but is grass-marked inside and out; it also has a break that shows it was ring-built.

One sherd, 7, has numerous small pieces of mica in it (not mere specks); while another, 12, has some mica but relatively much quartz grit. A rather hard fine light coloured (pinkish-buff) sherd is interesting, but not readily paralleled.

A grass-tempered piece, 2, probably from a slightly concave flat base, may be related to the 13th-14th century Norse pottery at Freswick, Caithness, but small grass-tempered craggan-like vessels from Islay are possibly later in the middle ages.

(The pottery from North Rona has been deposited in the Hunterian Museum, University of Glasgow.)