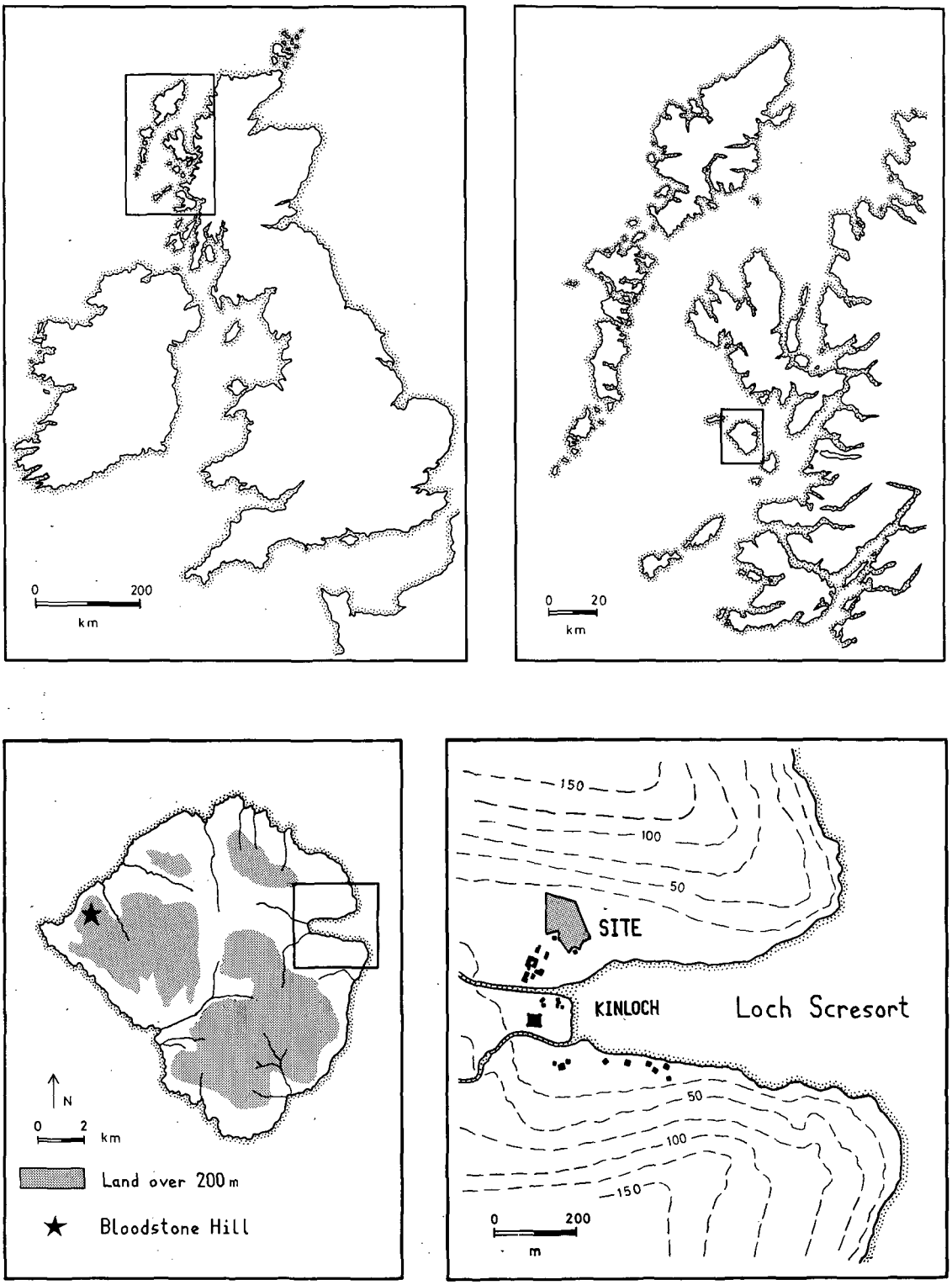


ILL 1: Location maps.

1 THE ISLAND BACKGROUND AND THE DISCOVERY OF THE SITE

THE PHYSICAL AND ECOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Rhum lies twenty four kilometres due west of the fishing harbour of Mallaig. It is one of the northern Inner Hebrides and it forms the largest of the four Small Isles (Ill 1). These islands (Rhum, Eigg, Muck and Canna) are grouped into the Small Isles parish and administratively they constitute a part of the Lochaber District, Highland Region. Rhum covers some 200 square kilometres, much of which is mountainous and barren.

The island incorporates a diverse geology (Ill 2a) (Emeleus 1987). The oldest rocks are Precambrian: much of the north and east of the island comprises Torridonian sandstones and shales but there are pockets of Lewisian Gneiss in the south. Small exposures of Triassic and Jurassic limestones survive elsewhere. The geological map is, however, dominated by Tertiary volcanic activity. The growth of a large Tertiary volcano in the southern half of the island resulted in the formation of a wide variety of igneous rocks which are surrounded by a ring fault. Much later, a further fault developed, running north-south down the middle of the island.

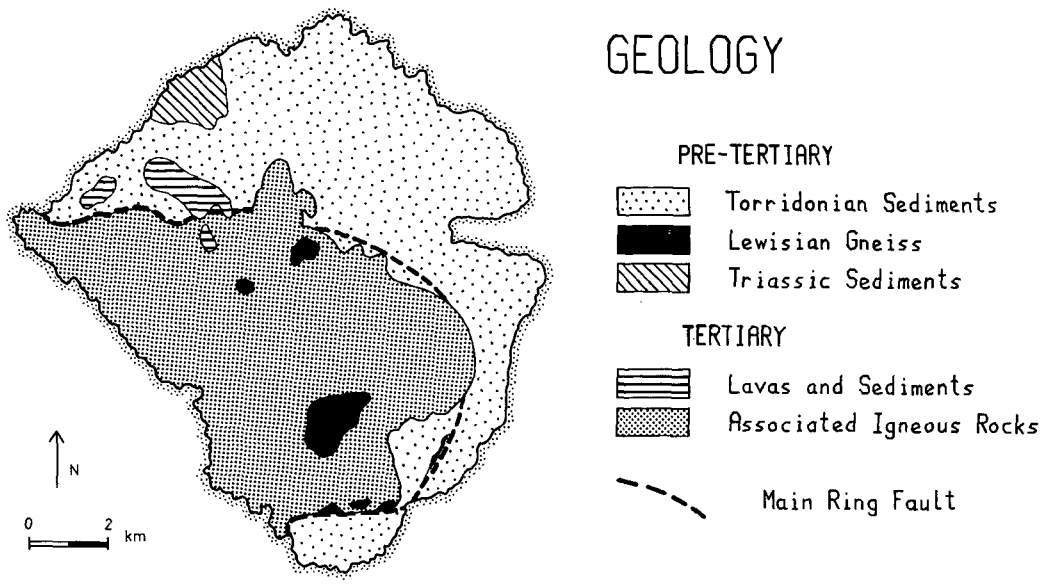
The geomorphology is described in detail in Chapter 12. Since the Tertiary period considerable erosion has reduced the original volcano to its roots, resulting in the ring of sharp peaks in the south of the island. To the north, the Torridonian sandstones are now tilted to the north-west and have weathered unevenly to produce a series of inclined benches, clearly visible along the north side of Kinloch Glen. During the Pleistocene, Rhum was greatly affected by the glaciations and it supported its own valley glaciers in the last (Loch Lomond) re-advance. Around the coasts. traces of the fluctuating sea levels of the late glacial and early postglacial periods are much in evidence.

Much of the island is overlain by peat of varying thickness, but in better drained areas thin, often unstable, soils have developed. The soils reflect the varied geology of the island (Ill 2b) (Emeleus 1987, 25–6). Flatter, fertile areas do exist on the coast at the mouths of the glens, and quartz marine sands occur in some areas, notably at Kilmory. Elsewhere the coastline consists of high cliffs, sometimes with rocky beaches at their foot.

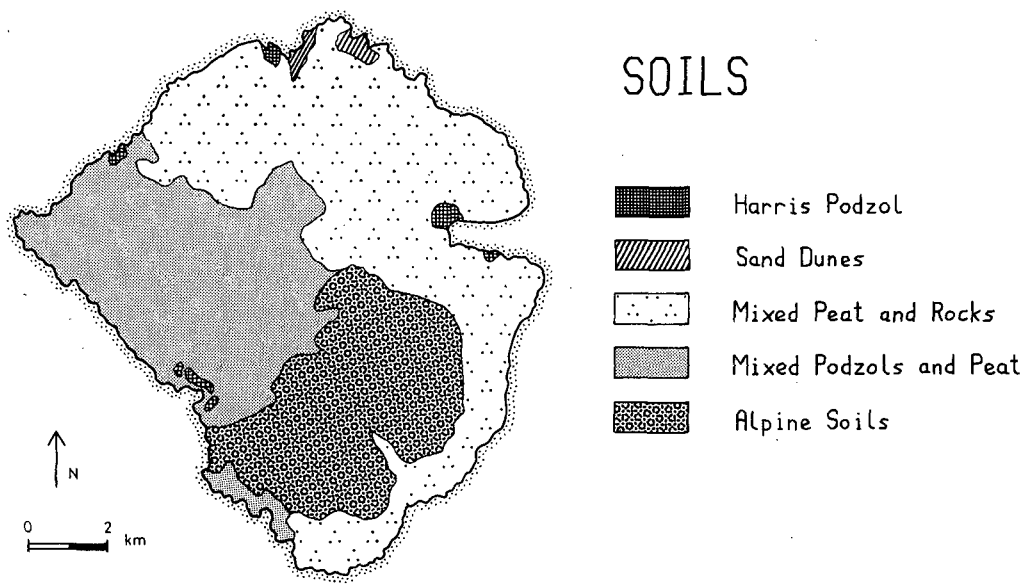
The steep topography of Rhum has lead to great local variations in climate, with the peaks casting their own rainshadows (NCC 1974, 8–13). The temperature today is generally mild, but winters can be cold and frosty. Rainfall is high, particularly in the east, and gusting winds, blowing down the glens, are common. The island is not short of fresh, running water. Two main rivers, the Kinloch and the Kilmory, drain the numerous mountain streams of the interior to the east and north respectively; smaller rivers and burns run down the wide glens. In line with the variation in rainfall, however, there can be considerable variation in the abundance of fresh water throughout the course of any one year.

Much of Rhum is covered by wet heath and blanket bog dominated by heather, but there are areas of grassland, particularly in the better drained parts and on the more developed soils (Ill 2c). On the high peaks herb-rich grassland has developed in association with colonies of Manx shearwaters. Limestone soils are only present in small patches and they do not produce the rich vegetation that might be expected. There is no surviving native woodland, but some mixed scrub remains in sheltered hollows and along the sides of deep gulleys (Chapter 11).

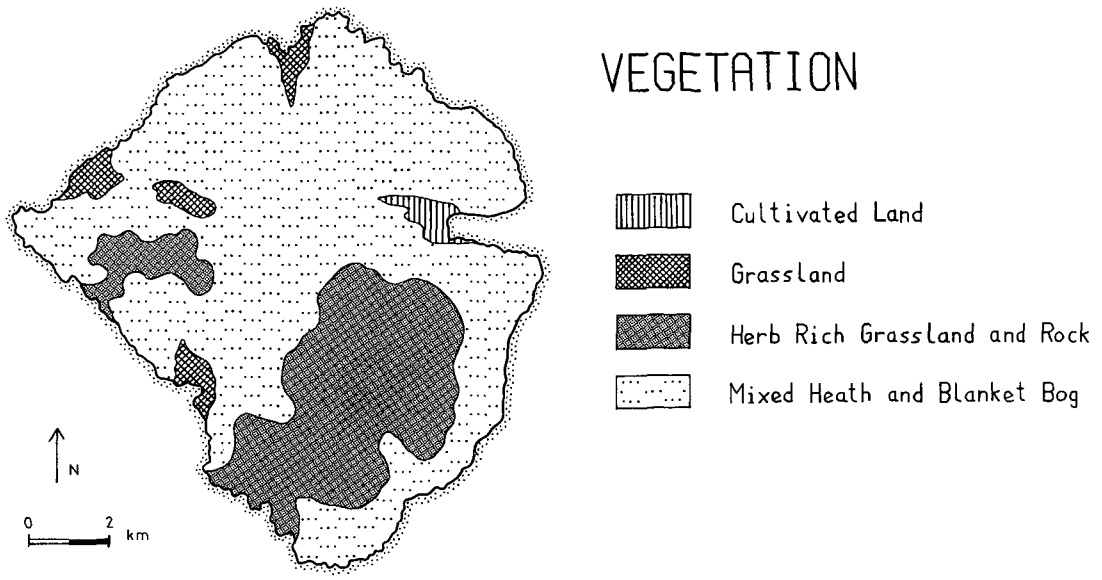
Rhum today supports a limited range of species (Clutton-Brock and Ball 1987, 143–55). Much research is currently taking place on the present fauna, but little is known about the history of any



ILL 2: Rhum:
a. Geology (after Emeleus 1987).



b. Soils (source NCC vegetation survey and map 1970).



c. Vegetation (source Macaulay Institute soil survey and map 1969).

of the island species. The acid soils mean that few areas have the organic preservation to permit analysis of the development of the postglacial fauna. One or two midden sites are known; they are preserved in caves (RCAHMS 1983, nos 8, 15), but no excavation of the remains has taken place. Midden excavation would be most interesting, for it would provide information on the antiquity of the species of Rhum and extend knowledge of the resources available to the early settlers of the island.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before the recent excavations there was no unequivocal evidence for prehistoric settlement on Rhum earlier than the fourth millennium BC. Early prehistoric activity was attested by a number of lithic scatters and isolated lithic finds. These were for the most part undated, but they included a few late neolithic/bronze age type fossils such as barbed-and-tanged points (eg Ill 59.14 found in 1982 on Hallival). In 1983 the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland recorded eight probable burial-cairns on Rhum (RCAHMS 1983, nos 1–4), but no evidence relating to the exact nature of the prehistoric occupation of the island had ever been examined in detail. It was known, however, that the lithic scatters, together with others on the neighbouring islands and mainland, made use of a siliceous rock loosely termed bloodstone. This rock was thought to be peculiar to Rhum, and some form of centrally based 'trade' had previously been postulated for its distribution and use (Ritchie 1968, 117–21).

The evidence for the later prehistoric occupation of Rhum is confined to three poorly preserved promontory forts. Even the earlier medieval period is only sketchily known: seventh-century cross slabs are preserved at Bagh na h-Uamha and at Kilmory (RCAHMS 1983. nos 16–17). Many of Rhum's prominent landmarks bear norse names (eg Askival, Trolleval, and Hallival), and these presumably result from the norse occupation of the Hebrides. However, with the exception of a midden deposit in one of the island caves that may tenuously be associated with the norse period, there are no certain remains from any norse settlement on Rhum (RCAHMS 1983, no 8).

The historic settlement of Rhum has been well documented (Love 1983; 1987; RCAHMS 1983, nos 18–47). Medieval and later permanent settlement has only ever been supported in the small, isolated pockets of fertile land that lie at the mouths of the major glens. In the early 19th century the island was cleared by the landowner and all but one family left for the Americas. Today, the glens are abandoned and the only settlement of any size is at Kinloch on the east coast. In 1957 the island was sold to the Nature Conservancy Council to be a National Nature Reserve and since then NCC have managed it, carrying out some replanting of the native woodland, and encouraging a variety of research work.

THE DISCOVERY AND POTENTIAL OF THE SITE

In 1983, at the invitation of the Nature Conservancy Council, officers of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland visited Rhum to carry out an archaeological survey. The lack of modern development has ensured that the settlement remains of the recent past are well preserved on Rhum, but it also means that earlier, prehistoric material has only rarely been uncovered. The work of the Royal Commission therefore resulted in the location of a wealth of field information relating to the historical occupation of the island, but it shed little light on the survival of earlier remains (RCAHMS 1983). These, ironically, are only to be found where development does take place.

During the Royal Commission visit to Rhum, routine agricultural activities by NCC staff led to the discovery of the site. One of the fields at Kinloch was ploughed slightly deeper than before and many flakes of bloodstone were disturbed. Amongst these the ploughman recognised a barbed-and-tanged arrowhead (Ill 59.13). This was shown to the Commission surveyors who visited the field and collected a sample of the surface material which they brought to the attention of the author (RCAHMS 1983, no 11).

The surface collection was composed almost entirely of local bloodstone, with some flint. There was only one diagnostic artifact (the arrowhead noted above), but the presence of many blades and flakes, together with much debris, indicated a large assemblage with a high quality of knapping. Excavation of the site would doubtless reveal detail of the poorly known prehistoric occupation of Rhum. Moreover, the quality of the sample indicated that analysis would provide much information upon the techniques of manufacture of the stone tools, and possibly of their use. This was of particular interest because the local presence of an abundant, high quality source of raw material such as bloodstone is rare in Scottish prehistory (Wickham-Jones 1986). In consequence the site at Kinloch offered the unusual chance to examine the management of a resource and to assess the influence of raw material on assemblage formation. As bloodstone was also used on prehistoric sites elsewhere on the west coast of Scotland a further dimension was added to the intended project (Chapter 13 below). Although it has been traditionally regarded as the result of trade (Ritchie 1968, 117– 21), the widespread occurrence of bloodstone had not been studied in detail. Information from the site at Kinloch, together with an examination of other existing assemblages, would provide the chance to investigate the nature of such 'trade' in more detail. With this potential in mind, a research strategy was drawn up and submitted for funding to the Scottish Development Department (Historic Buildings and Monuments) and permission was sought from the Nature Conservancy Council to carry out archaeological excavation at Kinloch.