

Shorter Notes

Cnoc Coig, Druim Harstell and Cnoc Riach: problems of the identification and location of shell middens on Oronsay

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In the course of recent work on the Mesolithic shell middens of Oronsay (Inner Hebrides), large-scale excavations have been carried out on the site known as Cnoc Coig – one of the four principal shell middens which border the SE-facing coast of the island (Mellars 1977). A preliminary survey of this site in 1973 suggested that the midden deposits had largely if not entirely escaped the attention of earlier excavators, but in the course of later work (between 1975 and 1979) it became clear that some kind of relatively modern disturbance of the deposits had occurred in at least one and possibly two separate parts of the site. A recently located manuscript in the Henderson Bishop collection of the Hunterian Museum, University of Glasgow, confirms that previous excavations were indeed carried out on the site in 1911, and that the finds from this excavation can be identified with the existing collections of material at present catalogued in the Hunterian Museum and the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland under the terms 'Druim Harstell' or 'Viking Mound' (Buchanan 1911; Brown *et al* forthcoming). Further references in these papers, coupled with the results of recent field surveys on Oronsay, have also cast doubt on the identity of the site which has always been referred to in the literature as 'Cnoc (or Croc) Riach', and raise the possibility that this site should also be identified with the Cnoc Coig midden (cf Anderson 1898, 312–13; Grieve 1923, 16, 41, 379; Lacaille 1954, 229). To avoid any confusions over terminology, therefore, it may be worth reviewing briefly what is currently known concerning the location and identity of these sites.

Druim Harstell. From the manuscript records of the 1911 excavations carried out by Mungo Buchanan at the site referred to as 'Druim Harstell' or 'Viking Mound' (Buchanan 1911) there can now be no doubt that this corresponds with the site which has been known throughout the current excavations as Cnoc Coig (Mellars 1977). The records of the 1911 excavation include a relatively detailed plan of the site showing the relationship of the midden deposit to current field boundaries, and also to a large area of rock outcrop which at present forms a conspicuous feature immediately to the N of the Cnoc Coig site. The remnants of the much smaller shell midden which Buchanan located a short distance to the NW of the main site are also still clearly visible at the present day (cf fig 1). Records of the excavation carried out by Buchanan within the midden area itself are fairly scanty, but from the accompanying plan and section of the site it would appear that the excavations were restricted to a relatively small trench extending from around the highest point of the mound towards the south-eastern margin. In the course of the current excavations only small-scale sampling trenches have been dug in this part of the site, but in one of these a small zone of disturbed material was found which might well represent the infill of the 1911 excavation trench. In any event, it is clear from the account of Buchanan's excavation that the total thickness of midden material encountered was at most 0.30 m, suggesting

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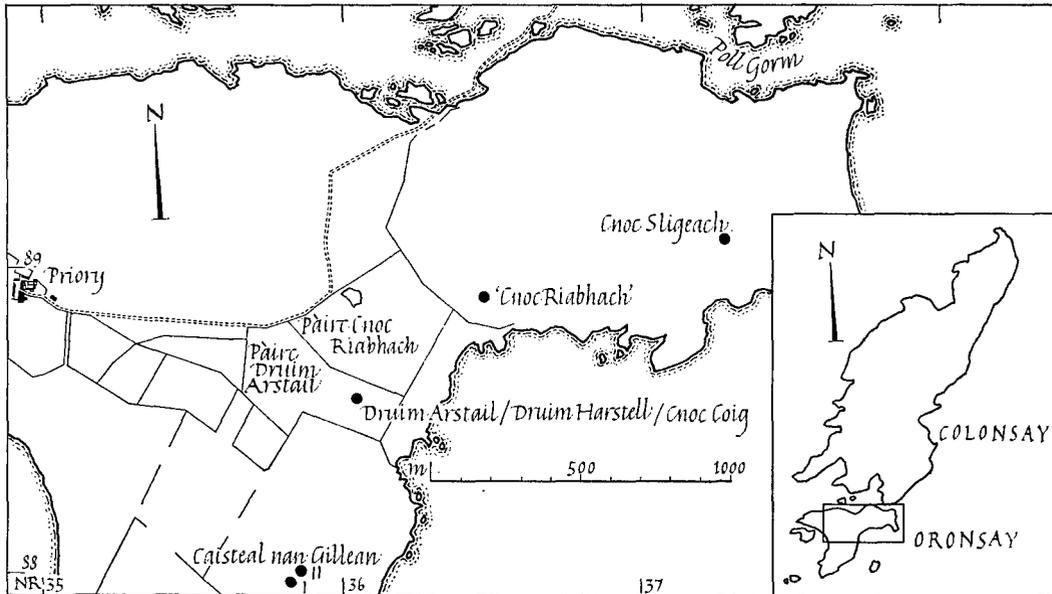


FIG 1 Location map

that the excavation was located towards the present edge of the midden deposits (cf Brown *et al* forthcoming).

Cnoc Riach/Riabhach. The material which was described by Joseph Anderson in 1898 as deriving from the site of 'Croc Riach' was evidently obtained during a campaign of excavations on Oronsay carried out (but never published) by William Galloway in the early 1880s (Anderson 1898, 312–13; Grieve 1923, 16, 41, 379). Anderson's account of this site is extremely brief, and the only hint as to the identity of the site is contained in Anderson's terse comment: 'A third shell-mound called locally Croc Riach, "the grey mound", was also explored by Mr Galloway, but no record of his observations appears to have been preserved.' It has generally been assumed by later workers that this site corresponds with the conspicuous conical mound which is still known locally under the name 'Cnoc Riabhach' (Cnoc Riabhach being the grammatically correct Gaelic spelling of the 'grey mound' term) and which lies approximately 530 m to the NE of the Cnoc Coig site. There are however reasons for questioning this assumption on the following grounds:

1. In the course of the 1979 field season on Oronsay a careful survey of the Cnoc Riabhach mound was made, and auger holes were sunk to a depth of at least 2 m at several points both on top of the mound and around its periphery. None of these soundings produced any trace whatever of midden deposits, nor even any trace of the kind of scattered shells that one would expect to find from the infill – or throw-out – of earlier excavation trenches. In our view this effectively rules out the possibility that the material recovered during the excavations of William Galloway was recovered from within the immediate area of the Cnoc Riabhach mound itself.

2. Information provided by Mrs Flora MacNeill indicates that the name 'Pàirc Cnoc Riabhach' (literally, the 'field of Cnoc Riabhach') has been used since at least the early part of the present century to refer to the whole of the present area lying between the Cnoc Riabhach mound itself and the prominent stone wall which lies only 60 m to the N of the Cnoc Coig midden (cf fig 1). The possibility that this could have resulted in some confusion between the 'Croc

Riach' site as described by Anderson and the present Cnoc Coig midden is further strengthened by the fact that several of the finds which are specifically described as having been found in the immediate vicinity of the 'Druim Harstell' mound during the excavations of 1911 are at present labelled in the museum collections as deriving from 'Cnoc Riabhach' (Brown *et al* forthcoming). On the assumption that the labelling of these specimens is approximately contemporary with the excavation of the finds, it would therefore appear that confusions over the precise geographical connotations of the Cnoc Riach/Cnoc Riabhach terms can be traced back to at least the early years of the present century.

3. During the recent excavations at Cnoc Coig a substantial area of disturbed deposits was encountered towards the north-western edge of the midden, which almost certainly represents the infill of earlier excavation trenches (significantly, the depth of this disturbance coincided almost exactly with the base of the midden, and finds of artefacts and animal bones in these areas were almost lacking.) To judge by the density of finds recorded in the rest of the Cnoc Coig deposits there is no reason to doubt that this area could have produced the quantity of material (principally 70 'limpet scoops' of stone, bone and antler) described by Anderson (1898, 313) as having been found in the excavations of William Galloway in the 'Croc Riach' site.

As the evidence stands at present, therefore, there is probably no way of establishing with complete certainty the identity or exact location of the enigmatic 'Croc Riach' midden on Oronsay. On the basis of the various points discussed above there would seem to be at least a strong possibility that this should be equated with the site now known as Cnoc Coig, and referred to in the 1911 excavations as 'Druim Harstell' or 'Viking Mound'. At the same time, however, it should be kept in mind that the area which has been known throughout the present century as 'Pàirc Cnoc Riabhach' is a fairly large one (covering approximately 15 hectares) and that the task of surveying the whole of this area for possible shell middens is seriously hampered by the thick deposits of wind-blown sand (many of which could have accumulated since the 19th century) and by the heavy covering of heather and bracken, which makes the search for surface exposures particularly difficult. The possibility that further shell middens await discovery in this area should certainly not be ruled out.

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