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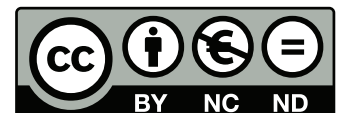
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Kisimul, Isle of Barra. Part 2: Archaeology and prehistoric occupation

Julie Franklin¹

with contributions by Julie Lochrie¹

ABSTRACT

Kisimul Castle was taken into the guardianship of Historic Scotland in 2000 and, in order to inform any future works for its upkeep, a programme of archaeological evaluation, building recording and historical research was undertaken in 2001. Following on from this, a detailed programme of post-excavation analysis and research was conducted in 2011–12. The historical and architectural work has been published as Part 1 (Holden 2017). This Part 2 covers the archaeological work. While frustratingly little was revealed by the archaeology in terms of the construction of the castle, it did identify evidence for prehistoric as well as post-medieval occupation. The finds, including a significant quantity of craggan ware pottery and an exquisite gold lace tag, provide an evocative picture of life on the isle and its inhabitants.

INTRODUCTION

An archaeological evaluation was carried out within Kisimul Castle (Illus 1–2) in conjunction with the building recording and historical research to supplement the evidence gleaned from these other sources. The work took the form of 12 narrow trenches designed to assess the survival of archaeological deposits within the site and evaluate their character (Illus 3). Deposits belonging to various phases of activity were found, up to 1.1m deep in places, however the nature of the excavation and deposits meant that it was often difficult to link stratigraphy between trenches.

The excavation results are presented separately here because surprisingly few of the excavated features assisted with the dating or sequence of the castle's construction. In fact, its most valuable findings relate to the discovery of previously unknown prehistoric activity on the island.

PREHISTORIC OCCUPATION

EARLY NEOLITHIC

Julie Franklin and Julie Lochrie

The Early Neolithic period was represented by a small number of in situ features and characterised

by the presence of Hebridean Incised Ware pottery backed up by radiocarbon dates. A hearth identified in Trench 9, in situ deposits found in the adjacent Trench 1, and further residual Neolithic pottery recovered from Trench 6 imply either that the early activity originally covered a wider area or that it was scattered by later building works.

The hearth deposit provided the best of the evidence. This was a charcoal deposit (C1073/C1072 (Illus 4)), set within a rough circle of stones and covering an area of c 0.6m×0.4m). In Trench 1 deposits were more extensive. The three lowest layers appeared to be largely undisturbed and many micro-laminations within the middle deposit confirm this. Thin-section analysis (Morrison 2012) indicated that this deposit was made up of inwashed clay, fuel residues and domestic debris. A turf ash residue, burnt to temperatures of around 400°C, could be identified alongside flecks of animal bone. The micro-laminations suggested inwash by the action of rainwater, potentially over many years, with each lens representing a single episode. The overlying layer was more homogeneous. The fall in amounts of pure clays suggests a greater anthropogenic influence and the presence of surface vegetation.

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ILLUS 1 Site location (© OpenStreetMap contributors, <http://www.openstreetmap.org/copyright>)



ILLUS 2 The castle in its setting (© Crown Copyright: HES)

High levels of anthropogenic waste were found in all of these deposits, including pottery, worked flint, animal bone, charcoal and cereal grains. Similarities in the pottery found in deposits in both trenches as well as near identical radiocarbon dates taken from charred cereal grain (GU-27056, GU-27058, Table 1) implied some continuity between the two trenches in the period between *c* 3600 and 3350 BC.

The Neolithic pottery is of the tradition of Hebridean Incised Wares, with parallels at Allt Chrìsal on Barra (Gibson 1995), less than 2.5km to the west of Kisimul. Further parallels come from a number of sites, Dunasbroc, Lewis (MacSween 2009) and Eilean an Tighe (Scott 1950–51); and Bharpa Carinish (Armit & MacSween 1993) on North Uist. Diagnostic sherds include Vessels 1072.1 and 1073.1 (Table 2), each with a possible carination or cordon and some simple incised lines, and Vessel 1006.3 with rows of incised decoration. The distinct rim form of Vessel 1006.4 (Illus 5) is almost identical in decoration and basic shape to one found at Allt Chrìsal, Barra (Gibson 1995: 105, fig 4.32,

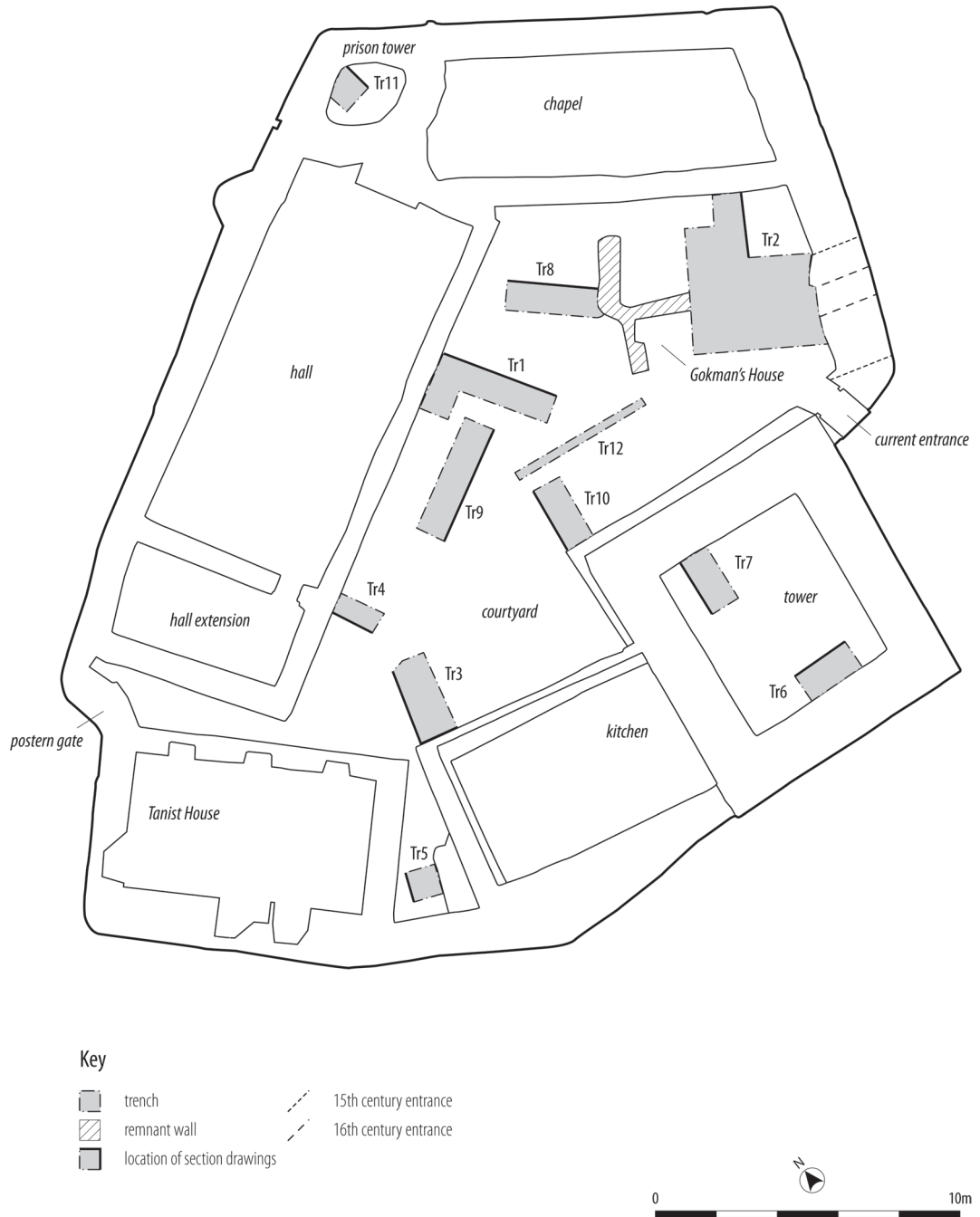
no. 73). Dates for similar pottery elsewhere fall around the early 4th millennium BC (Gibson 1995: 114–15; MacSween 2009: 122) providing further confidence in the dating of the Kisimul samples.

The Neolithic pottery from Trench 6 is likely to be residual as it is mixed with sherds of a type more likely to date to the Iron Age. They do, however, provide the best typological evidence for the period. The pottery is of the Carinated Bowl tradition and includes two vessels with flanged rims and upright necks (Vessel 1065.2; Vessel 1066.2) and a third vessel with a flatter ‘rolled’ rim (Vessel 1066.1), all three shown in Illus 5. All the vessels are burnished (see Table 2 for more detail). These carinated bowls should be seen as part of the same pottery tradition as the Hebridean Incised Wares which were often used concurrently (Gibson 1995: 104).

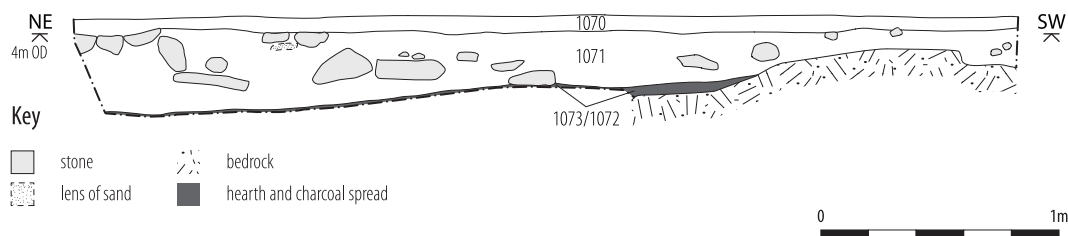
A number of flint flakes and chips were found in the Trench 9 hearth deposits, but none were present in the early Trench 1 deposits. There were, however, another 113 chipped

TABLE 1
Radiocarbon dates

Sample	Material	Context	Description	Depositional Context	Uncalibrated	Calibrated 1-sigma	Calibrated 2-sigma	Delta-13C %
GU-27056	Charred grain <i>Hordeum vulgare</i> (Barley)	C1006 Tr.1	Undisturbed in-washed deposit containing Neolithic pottery	Secondary	4710 ± 30	3625–3601 BC (14.7%) 3536–3499 BC (16.3%) 3433–3379 BC (37.2%)	3631–3567 BC (24.7%) 3536–3493 BC (21.0%) 3469–3373 BC (49.7%)	-20.9
GU-27058	Charred grain <i>Hordeum vulgare</i> (Barley)	C1073 Tr.9	Hearth deposit overlying bedrock	Primary	4625 ± 30	3497–3457 BC (49.4%) 3377–3361 BC (18.8%)	3513–3425 BC (70.0%) 3403–3400 BC (0.3%) 3384–3350 BC (25.0%)	-21.5
GU-27053	Charcoal <i>Alnus glutinosa</i> (Alder)	C1034 Tr.7	Disturbed natural deposit containing Neolithic/Early Bronze Age flint knives	Secondary	3715 ± 30	2192–2180 BC (7.4%) 2142–2120 BC (16.3%) 2096–2041 BC (44.4%)	2201–2028 BC	-25.3
GU-27057	Charcoal <i>Alnus glutinosa</i> (Alder)	C1043 Tr.10	Possible midden deposit containing late prehistoric pottery	Secondary	3120 ± 30	1433–1384 BC (62.7%) 1332–1325 BC (5.5%)	1453–1312 BC	-24.7
GU-27054	Bone sheep/goat scapula	C1065 Tr.6	Midden deposit related to occupation of the castle	Secondary	320 ± 30	AD 1518–1594 (53.6%) AD 1619–1640 (14.6%)	AD 1482–1646	-21.5
GU-27055	Bone cattle long bone	C1036 Tr.7	Midden deposit related to occupation of the castle	Secondary	290 ± 30	AD 1522–1574 (45.7%) AD 1627–1651 (22.5%)	AD 1492–1603 (64.5%) AD 1615–1663 (30.9%)	-21.8



ILLUS 3 Plan of the site showing excavated trench locations



ILLUS 4 Section showing the early hearth, Trench 9

stone artefacts found scattered throughout other later deposits in most trenches. These were largely of flint, a few of quartz and included multi-platform cores, scrapers and other retouched pieces, flakes and chips. Significantly, the material was concentrated in the upper deposits of Trench 1 where it provides the best statistical evidence for on-site knapping. Although none of this material can be closely dated, it is likely that it relates to Early Neolithic activity on the island.

Animal bone was scarce and fragmentary but did include a phalanx and a vertebra of sheep or goats and six fish bones, one of which was a haddock vertebra (Tommasino-Suárez 2011). Shellfish may also have been exploited, with finds including limpets, whelks and cockles.

There were also a large number of charred cereal grains, concentrated in hearth deposit C1073/C1072 (Illus 4) and particularly in nearby inwashed deposits. The cereal assemblage was composed of naked barley (*Hordeum vulgare var. nudum*), emmer wheat (*Triticum dicoccum*) and possible bread/club wheat (*Triticum aestivo-compactum*). A small proportion of barley grains were suggestive of hulled barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) (Power 2012). Some were very small and probably represent underdeveloped ‘tail grains’ from the end of the ear.

A number of land snails were found in these deposits but they are considered unlikely to be representative of Neolithic climatic conditions. Given the naturally acidic ground conditions it is more likely that these burrowing species are of medieval and later date, owing their preservation to the locally high pH created by lime mortar in the buildings above (Stephen Carter pers comm).

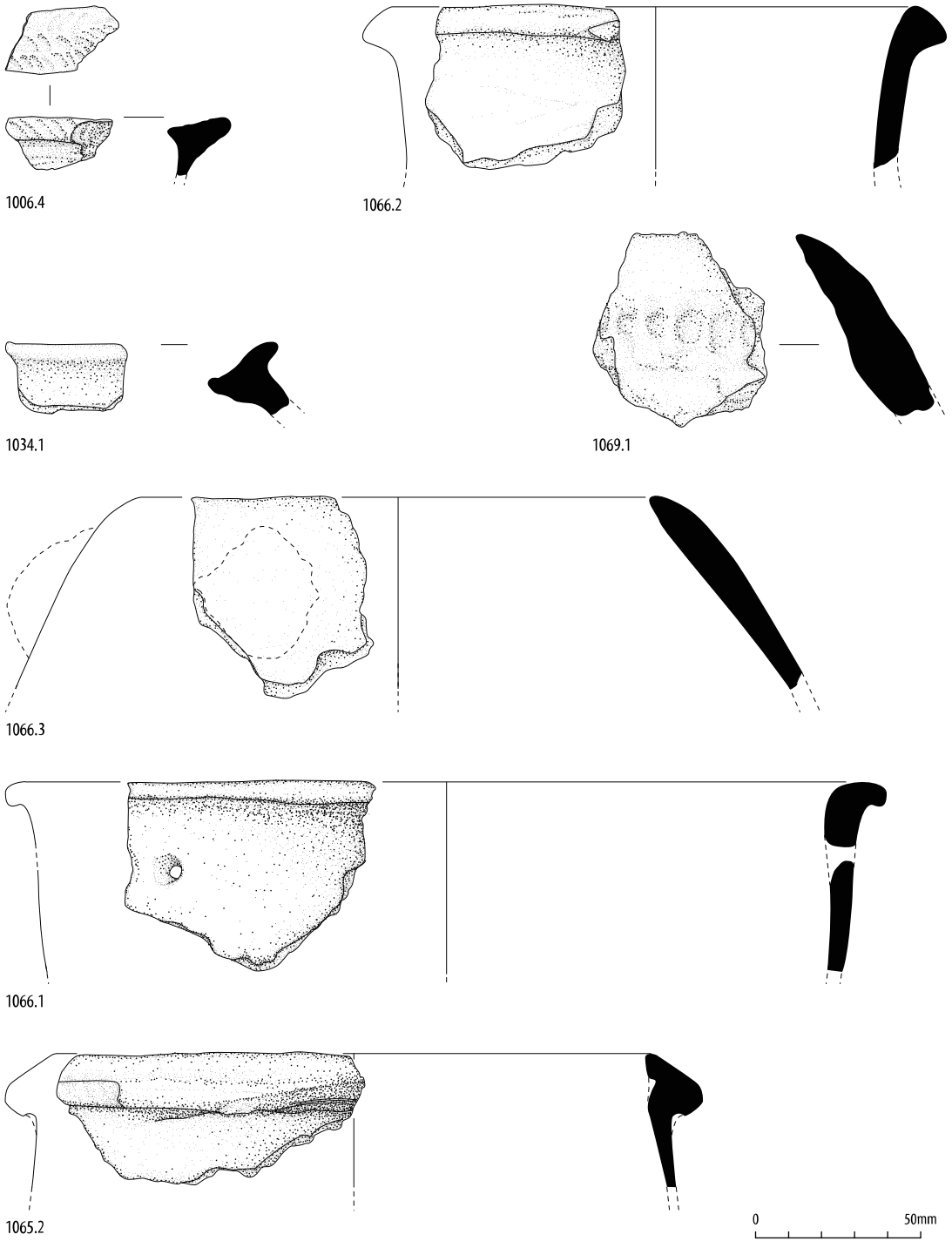
LATE NEOLITHIC

Julie Franklin and Julie Lochrie

The Late Neolithic period on the site was evidenced by two flint finds and an associated radiocarbon date from a single deposit (C1034, Trench 7 (Illus 6)).

The two flint finds were plano-convex knives, SF4 and SF19 (Illus 7). These were cutting tools in use throughout the Neolithic period in Scotland and Ireland (Ballin 2006: 24; Woodman et al 2006: 167), although they are perhaps more commonly associated with burials and cremations of the Early Bronze Age (Clark 1932). Interestingly, one was severely burnt, a feature, not surprisingly, often noted on flint tools from cinerary contexts. Associated charcoal might also point towards a cremation deposit, with one sample providing a radiocarbon date of 2201–2028 BC (GU-27053), at the end of the Neolithic period, which could well be contemporary with the knives. However, notably absent from this deposit, or indeed anywhere on this site, were traces of human bone, either cremated or unburnt. There was also no trace of a cist, although these are by no means found with every burial or cremation.

Associated material from the same context, C1034 (Illus 6), included two undiagnostic flints and three pot sherds from two vessels. The most distinctive of these pots was an unusual flanged vessel rim with a lip at the interior angle (Vessel 1034.1 (Illus 5)). This is an interesting find which is not of the typical urn-type vessels known from Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age cinerary contexts or of food vessels or beakers known from funerary contexts. While its age cannot be determined, based on the current

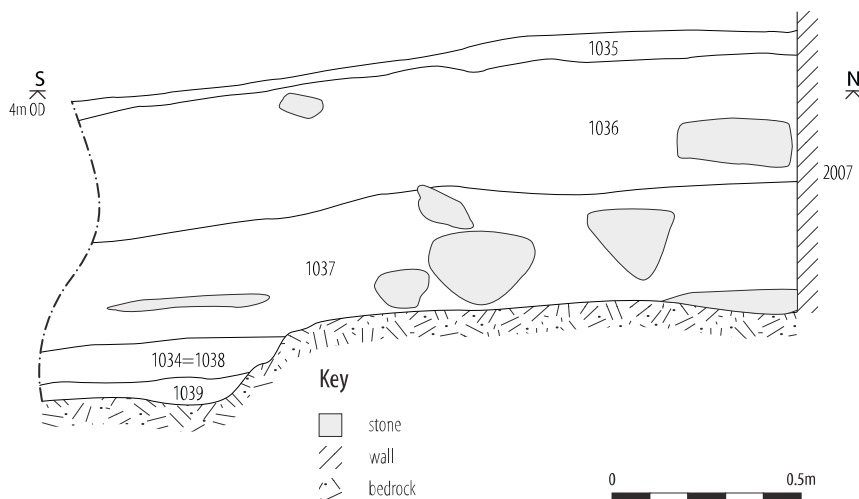


ILLUS 5 Prehistoric pottery

TABLE 2
Selected prehistoric pottery vessels

<i>Vessel No.</i>	<i>Trench</i>	<i>Ware</i>	<i>Fabric</i>	<i>Sherd Count</i>	<i>Weight (g)</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Period</i>
1006.3	1	Hebridean Decorated Ware	Dark grey throughout, sandy fabric with occasional fine mica and common, fine angular off-white rock inclusions.	1	20	Large neck sherd with an everted edge, either representing the start of the neck or a possible carination. Two bands of diagonal scored/grooved decoration (wide, U-sectioned and shallow) at neck. Sooted on exterior.	E–M Neol
1006.4*	1	Hebridean Decorated Ware	Buff throughout, fine sandy fabric with occasional, moderate, angular quartz fragments.	1	6	Small decorative rim. Flat topped or with slight internal bevel, orientation is unclear. The external rim edge is squared off, rim diam 300–500mm. Faint incised herring bone decoration on the internal bevel with diagonal incised decoration along the squared edge. Smoothing marks on exterior below rim.	E–M Neol
1072.1	9	Hebridean Decorated Ware	Dark grey, reddish buff exterior, sandy with rock fragments, sparse mica.	1	16	Body sherd with incised decoration of four parallel (vertical?) lines. Possible carination or cordon. Thick residue on interior.	E–M Neol
1073.1	9	Hebridean Decorated Ware	Dark grey, buff exterior, sandy with crushed rock fragments.	3	19	Small body sherds, two incised, one with thickening possibly forming a cordon or carination. Decorative incised lines.	E–M Neol
1065.2*	6	Carinated Bowl Pottery	Dark grey, fine with well crushed rock fragments, mica.	1	46	Jar with unusual heavy flanged rim on top of a thin walled upright neck. Triangular clubbed rim, roughly formed by pushing down and folding on the interior and exterior to create an externally beveled flange. Rim diam 180–200mm. Walls sloping gently outwards from rim down. Burnished surface, sooting on exterior.	E–M Neol
1066.2*	6	Carinated Bowl Pottery	Dark grey with paler interior, fine, well crushed rock fragments, mica.	1	38	Straight-sided vessel with flanged rim over upright neck. Similar in shape to V1065.2 but smaller and much better executed with little remaining evidence of folds or joins. Rim diam 160mm. Burnished surface, sooting on exterior.	E–M Neol
1066.1*	6	Carinated Bowl Pottery	Black, fine, small gravel, mica.	1	53	Bowl with flattened flanged rim which appears to be rolled. Rim diam 265mm. 4mm perforation 20mm below lip. Smoothed or burnished surface and sooting to both sides.	E–M Neol
1034.1*	7	–	Grey with buff brown surfaces, coarse sandy, mica.	2	18	Rim and body sherd from probable jar. The rim is flanged with unusual lip at interior angle, diam 160mm. Some sooting.	–
1043.1	10	Shouldered Jar	Dark grey, reddish buff exterior, coarse sandy, mica.	20	114	Four rims and other sherds, some conjoining. Squared rim, slightly inturned. Decorated with horizontal row of finger pinching to the shoulder.	LPH
1066.3*	6	Shouldered Jar	Dark grey, fine, well crushed rock fragments, mica.	1	51	Large shouldered vessel with in-turning simple rim. Rim diam 150mm. Burnished to a smooth shine. Large concretion and sooting on exterior.	LPH
1069.1*	10	Shouldered Jar	Dark grey, reddish buff exterior, coarse sandy, mica.	1	52	Inturned rim and slight shoulder from either barrel shaped or shouldered jar. Horizontal band of finger pinching to the shoulder, 30mm below rim, similar to that seen on V1043.1. Sooting on exterior.	LPH

* Illustrated in Illus 5



ILLUS 6 Trench 7 section

body of knowledge, it is more likely to date to the Iron Age, where the ceramic history is less well understood. Other material also suggests disturbance: a fragment of post-medieval glass and a single oat grain (*Avena* sp.), typically an Iron Age or later crop.

Furthermore, the deposit underlying this, C1039 (Illus 6), is potentially a continuation of late prehistoric layers encountered in other trenches (see MIDDLE BRONZE AGE TO IRON AGE, below). This suggests that the layers containing the Late Bronze Age lithics were probably redeposited rather than merely disturbed.

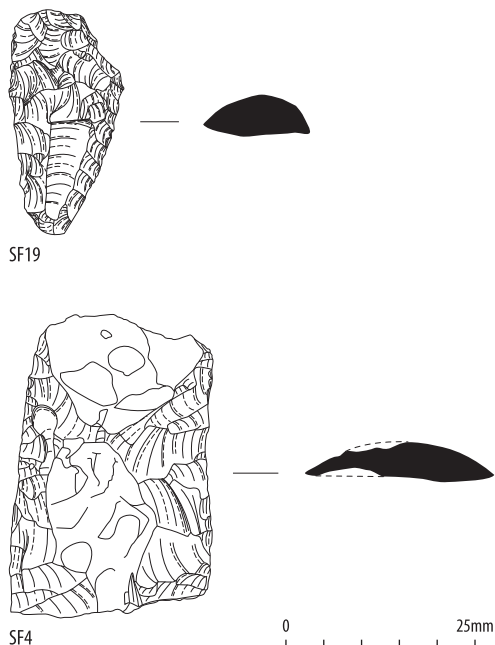
The balance of finds and radiocarbon evidence is for a distinct but discrete period of activity at the end of the Neolithic period, involving the ritual deposition of a cremation burial furnished with flint knives in the vicinity of Trench 7. However, stratigraphy, finds and environmental evidence, as well as a lack of associated cremated bone, combine to suggest this was then redeposited during Iron Age or later activity.

MIDDLE BRONZE AGE TO IRON AGE

Julie Franklin and Julie Lochrie

The evidence for later prehistoric activity was less consistent than earlier phases although it did include a discernible horizon of organic silt

deposits across the footprint of the tower. Dating was provided by a quantity of pottery, which could be loosely dated to Late Bronze Age or Iron Age, but the only associated radiocarbon sample



ILLUS 7 Worked stone

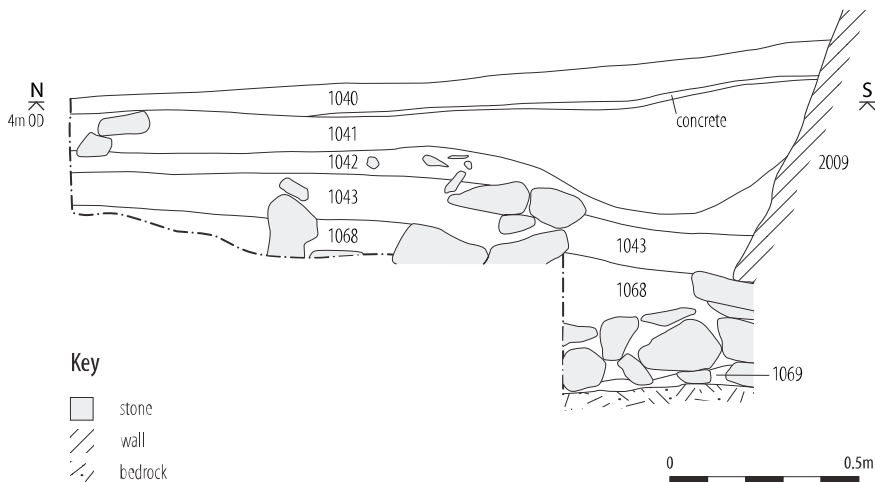
returned a somewhat earlier Middle Bronze Age date (GU-27057, 1453–1312 BC).

The horizon was defined by dark organic sandy silt deposits encountered as thin basal layers overlying bedrock in Trenches 7 (C1039 (Illus 6)) and 10 (C1069 (Illus 8)), and as a thicker semi-waterlogged layer over the lower lying bedrock in Trench 6. Pottery was encountered in this layer in two of the trenches (see below), although unfortunately none in Trench 7. The level of the top of this deposit was broadly consistent across the three trenches, suggesting it may have been levelled during the construction of the tower.

Analysis of the thickest waterlogged deposit by thin section confirms this deposit accumulated in situ (Morrison 2012). Five micro-stratigraphic horizons were visible within it and a variety of methods of deposition observed. There was evidence of wind-blown and waterborne deposition, various anthropogenic particles including bone material and pottery fragments, evidence for vegetation, and a certain amount of disturbance during and after deposition. These suggest deposition during a period of occupation.

Possibly also belonging to this phase was a thick rubble deposit, C1068 (Illus 8), which overlay the putative late prehistoric horizon in Trench 10. Equally, however, this may date to the construction of the castle tower,

the foundations (C2009 (Illus 8)) for which it directly underlies. The only dating evidence for this deposit lies in two sherds of largely undiagnostic (although probably prehistoric) pottery. Pottery in the overlying layer, C1043 (Illus 8), which banks up against the tower foundations, was, however, diagnostically late prehistoric and had therefore probably been redeposited. It included 20 sherds from the same shouldered jar (Vessel 1043.1, Table 2). Further confusion was added by the radiocarbon dates. No dating samples were retrieved from the late prehistoric layer, or even the overlying rubble. The closest available sample was a piece of alder charcoal from the clearly redeposited C1043. Although obviously not in situ, it was hoped that this sample would prove contemporary with the pottery found within the layer. However, given the Middle Bronze Age date (GU-27057, Table 1) it is unlikely to be so. The Middle Bronze Age date does not, in fact, appear to be contemporary with any other material recovered from the site and is thus hard to interpret. It may suggest a longer period of occupation, or a single Middle Bronze Age episode. Either way, it does not help to interpret the rubble layer. While it is perhaps safer for the present to assume that this was a levelling deposit for the castle, the possibility that it represents the remains of an earlier, prehistoric structure cannot be discounted.



ILLUS 8 Trench 10 section

The pottery provides the main dating evidence for this phase of activity. Later prehistoric vessel forms were identified in the late prehistoric horizon in Trenches 6 and 10 and redeposited in layers above Trench 10. Typically these vessels were large shouldered forms with inturned rims (Vessels 1043.1, 1066.3, 1069.1 (Table 2; Illus 5)) a form popular in the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age of the Western Isles (Harding 2000: figs 8 and 9). Two of these were decorated with a horizontal row of pinching on the shoulder (Vessels 1043.1 and 1069.1 (Table 2; Illus 5)). This decoration may be likened in form and positioning to the wavy, impressed, pinched and incised cordons common on Iron Age pottery of the Western Isles (Young 1955–6: 308–9, figs 10 and 11; Topping 1987: 69, illus 2). In fact, the pinched decoration on the Kisimul vessels has a striking similarity in appearance to two vessels from Dun Cuier, Barra (Young 1955–6: 309, vessels 94 and 95), a flattened type which Young termed ‘debased variant’ of the cordoned tradition.

No other material was recovered from the late prehistoric horizon to aid dating or interpretation. There was no animal bone, charcoal, snail shells or other environmental remains.

It does seem reasonable to conclude that there was a later prehistoric presence on the island and that deposits relating to this occupation may be widespread underlying the castle tower. The potential presence of late prehistoric rubble (C1068 (Illus 8)) on the site is intriguing and suggests there may have been a substantial stone structure on site predating the castle.

DISCUSSION OF THE PREHISTORIC EVIDENCE

In spite of the limited area of the site excavated, there is good evidence for the island having been visited on numerous occasions in the prehistoric period. It seems unlikely that this represents continuous settlement as it stretches credulity to suggest that such an exposed and confined spot would have seen permanent settlement from the Early Neolithic to the present. Instead this is likely to represent a series of different occupations of varying natures, purposes and durations.

Unfortunately the thin soil, exposed nature of the site and the lack of space all contribute to the patchy survival of evidence for early activity. In fact, the presence of in situ Early Neolithic deposits at all proved a revelation during the post-excavation process. The duration and permanence of the occupation are important questions but largely unanswerable given the present evidence. The closeness of the two Early Neolithic dates (GU-27056, GU-27058 (Table 1)) means this activity could have been extremely short lived, although clearly long enough for several pots to be broken. It may have been over the course of one season or numerous transient visits over a number of years. The evidence that could answer these questions potentially still survives beneath the castle.

Oddly, despite its fragmentary evidence, the earliest occupation of the site is the easiest to characterise. The pottery, cereal grain, a possible in situ hearth and a few scraps of animal bone, fish bone and shellfish remains all point towards food preparation and consumption.

An Early Neolithic presence at first seems surprising. It seems an unlikely spot for a domestic settlement at a time when defence is not assumed to be a prime concern, but recent investigations at a number of sites on small islets have revealed that many of them have their roots in the Neolithic period. Sites such as Eilean Domhnuill (Armit 1992: 309–6; 1996) and Eilean an Tighe (Scott 1950–1) are both located on islets within lochs on North Uist. Ephemeral and disturbed structural remains were found at both, as well as pottery assemblages comparable to that of Kisimul. A large quantity of Neolithic pottery, lithics and associated environmental remains were recovered from Dunasbroc, a sea stack on the west coast of Ness, Isle of Lewis (McHardy et al 2009: 87–101). Neolithic pottery was also reported on Pigmies Isle, a tidal islet off the coast of the Butt of Lewis (Armit 1992: 318). It is not clearly understood why this should be a feature of the Western Isles’ Neolithic period, although clearly there is no shortage of natural islets to use. The Dunasbroc remains were interpreted as related to possible votive offerings (MacHardy et al 2009: 100). Armit (1996: 52–4) speculates that the locations

were attractive because they were removed from, but surrounded by, the natural world, emphasising the difference between culture and nature, while Squair (1998: 539) saw them as 'prestigious and conspicuous locations', where access was 'probably restricted, ... governed by kinship alliances, gift obligations and feasting engagements'. The Kisimul evidence is certainly not inconsistent with a site of feasting engagements, but it is too meagre to confirm it.

These islet sites may once have been more common because sea level rise during the Neolithic period and peat growth from the Bronze Age onwards may have led to many similar sites being submerged or hidden. In fact, sea level rise due to isostatic readjustment will have altered the nature of the island at Kisimul since the Early Neolithic period (McHardy et al 2009: 6). Currently the depth of water between the island and the shore is about 8m and there is no trace of there ever having been a causeway of any kind. It is likely that it was still an island during the Early Neolithic, albeit larger, and possibly more easily accessed at low tide. As well as lower sea levels, Barra in the Neolithic period generally enjoyed a more benign climate than at present, with warmer and drier conditions (Gilbertson & Grattan 1995: 5) and a diversity of woodland cover (Squair 1998: 20).

Evidence for Neolithic settlement in the Western Isles is rather lacking. In contrast to the large stone-built ritual monuments, the most notable being the Calanais stone circle in Lewis, the evidence for domestic structures suggests they were often flimsy and probably temporary. The consensus is that the Neolithic economy was still, to an extent, reliant on hunting and gathering and that settlement was transient, much as it had been in the preceding Mesolithic period (Armit 1992: 319–20; Squair 1998: 540). The site of Allt Chrìsal, less than 2.5km to the west of Kisimul, provides more substantial and permanent structural evidence in the form of a stone-built roundhouse which may have been occupied for a millennium (Foster 1995: 57), together with further evidence of working areas, flint knapping and possibly even pottery production. Allt Chrìsal is easily accessible by boat along the coast. The radiocarbon dates

from both sites are similar, the two Kisimul dates falling in the middle of the range of the three dates from Allt Chrìsal (Foster 1995: 51–2), with one near identical (cf Allt Chrìsal, 4700 BP ± 100; Kisimul, 4710 BP ± 30). The two sites were clearly occupied concurrently and the inhabitants of Allt Chrìsal would have been known to the people at Kisimul. We might speculate further that the activity at Kisimul was undertaken by the same people that had a more permanent dwelling at Allt Chrìsal. What these activities at Kisimul were remain unknown, based on the current evidence. They may have been occasional feasting, or seasonal fishing or shellfishing trips.

The nature of the Late Neolithic activity is more elusive. The evidence is disturbed but the association of apparently contemporary charcoal and flint knives, one of which is burnt, point towards a cremation burial. This was probably disturbed by later prehistoric occupation and any traces of associated cremated bone, cist or pottery have been lost. This ritual use of the site some 1,300 years after the earlier activity might suggest that there had indeed been a ritual feasting element to the Early Neolithic occupation and that the memory of the associations with the island were preserved in the later population.

The Middle Bronze Age is the hardest period of all to characterise as the only certain evidence for it is a radiocarbon date from a residual piece of alder charcoal in a layer post-dating the castle's construction. This would appear to be at odds with the pottery from the same context which is thought to be at least several centuries later. Two possibilities present themselves: either the later prehistoric occupation lasted for a considerable period of time, or the charcoal and pottery belong to different phases of activity.

The Late Bronze Age or Iron Age period is more clearly defined with the survival of in situ deposits, within and adjacent to the castle tower footprint. These deposits may well once have covered a wider area but the nature of the activity can only be guessed at. The only evidence comes from a handful of pottery sherds and although this potentially indicates food

or drink preparation other interpretations are equally possible.

Interpretation is further hindered by a lack of accurate dating evidence. The pottery can only be broadly dated to the Late Bronze Age or Iron Age periods, giving a range of a millennium or more in which this activity might have taken place. With no radiocarbon evidence from this period and precious little in the way of accompanying evidence we can but guess. Ambiguous Iron Age activity was also noted at Dunasbroc (McHardy et al 2009: 100) where it was linked to Iron Age activity at Neolithic chambered tombs. It is possible that stack and promontory sites such as Dunasbroc and, indeed, Kisimul island, with their apparent history of Neolithic ritual use, could have held similar significance for Iron Age populations.

The Iron Age in the Western Isles was characterised by building in stone, with roundhouses developing into complex Atlantic roundhouses and brochs from the mid-1st millennium BC onwards (Harding 2000). The easily defensible position of the offshore island would have been as obvious in late prehistory as it was in the late medieval period. In this context, the rubble found underlying one part of the castle tower with accompanying Late Bronze Age to Iron Age pottery is of interest. Of course, any stone-built structure on the island would have been dismantled and its stone reused during the construction of the castle. These meagre traces may be the only remnants of a once substantial building. However, without further structural evidence or more accurate dating, the nature of the structural remains are unknowable.

MEDIEVAL TO EARLY POST-MEDIEVAL OCCUPATION

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SUMMARY

Evidence for the construction and occupation of the castle was found in all excavated trenches except Trench 12, which was only excavated to the base of the topsoil (Illus 3). These deposits could be divided into three types: lower deposits; floor surfaces; and later levelling deposits.

Lower deposits

These deposits varied in nature, colour, matrix, quantities of stone, charcoal, and midden material, to the extent that there was no observable medieval horizon across the area. Even trenches in close proximity showed distinct differences. The sequences of neighbouring Trenches 6 and 7, for example, seemed to be similar. Both feature a castle-period midden deposit (eg C1036 (Illus 6) and C1065 – see Table 1), both radiocarbon dated to between the late 15th and mid-17th centuries over a stonier layer (see C1037, Illus 6). However, in Trench 6 this lower stony layer contained prehistoric pottery and predates the tower construction; in Trench 7, it contained no finds and abuts the basal course of the tower.

Once again it seems that the building and occupation history of the area has led to a complex sequence of deposition, redeposition and disturbance that is difficult to resolve from these small trenches. Finds were recovered in some but few of these could be tightly dated and thus no absolute chronology could be established between trenches. The deposits varied from stony to charcoal-flecked silt, to dark brown humic silt with midden material. Some appeared to be preparations for building work (eg Trench 2), some possibly to form a level surface or floor (eg Trench 7, C1037 (Illus 6); Trench 10, C1043 (Illus 8)). Some deposits contained ‘midden’ material including pottery and animal bone (eg Trench 7, C1036 (Illus 6)), but none appears to represent in situ dumps.

For some of these deposits relative dating was available based on their relationship to the castle walls. Deposits in Trench 2 were banked up against the lower east curtain wall of the castle. In Trench 10, C1042 and C1043 (Illus 8) were likewise built up against the wall of the tower (in the case of the latter, containing only prehistoric finds, it would otherwise have been dated to the Late Bronze Age or Iron Age).

Apart from the radiocarbon evidence, dating was mainly and rather unsatisfactorily provided by craggan pottery (Illus 10). These were particularly concentrated in the midden deposits of Trenches 6 and 7 (C1065, C1036), but sherds

were widely spread across the excavated trenches. Craggan wares were hand-formed globular jars produced in the Hebrides from at least the 16th century, and possibly as early as the 15th century. In the Western Isles the tradition survived as late as the 1930s (Cheape 1993: 120). However, as there was little identifiable change over these centuries of production it is of little use for dating other than in the broadest terms. Unfortunately there were no sherds from Scottish mainland, English or European wares recovered from these stratified midden deposits which could have helped to date them more closely. Elsewhere, however, some sherds of wheel-thrown pottery were associated with residual craggan sherds and these indicated occupation potentially as early as the 15th century, certainly from the 16th century onwards and continuing until the late 17th or early 18th century. This broadly agrees with the accepted early 15th-century dating for the tower's construction (Holden 2017) and with the radiocarbon dates taken from two bones within the midden, both dating between the late 15th and mid-17th century (GU-27054, GU-27055). The lack of clay pipes in these deposits suggests deposition does not continue far into the 17th century.

The Gokman's House floor surfaces

Overlying the lower deposits in Trench 2 within the footprint of the 16th- and 17th-century Gokman's House (meaning a guard house) and its extension were a number of successive surfaces. Little effort seems to have been made in constructing these. Typically they were of compact sandy or silty clay, with occasional rounded pebbles or cobbles, although not to the extent that these would be considered cobbled surfaces. The deposits probably represent a combination of accumulated material with the occasional spreading of stony material to stabilise and level the surface. It is likely then that finds from these deposits relate to activities undertaken within the structure and they point predominantly towards ironworking (see *Industry*, below). There were no finds to date the lower three layers and little but craggan ware to date the upper surfaces. The uppermost surface, however, also contained clay pipe

stems dating to the 17th century, probably after c 1630. It also seems reasonable to assume that deposits below this, which contain midden material but no clay pipes, probably pre-date this watershed.

Later activity and levelling layers

Occupation continued into the 17th century. The latest sherd found was a piece of Staffordshire type combed slipware in the topsoil (Trench 9, C1070). It can be dated to between c 1670 and c 1730 (Barker & Crompton 2007: 43) and thus is unlikely to have been discarded before the late 17th century. Following this there appears to be a hiatus in deposition until the early 20th century.

Levelling layers were found in most trenches (eg Trench 9, C1071 (Illus 4); Trench 10, C1041 (Illus 8)). These appear to be related to later building works, during the redevelopment of the castle in the 20th century. They are made up of rubble and midden material relating to the occupation with very little or no later material. They thus provide some insight into life at the castle, although unfortunately residual. This material unfortunately included almost all the wheel-thrown pottery.

CHARACTER OF THE CASTLE OCCUPATION

The main value of the archaeological evidence was in the recovered artefactual and environmental remains and their ability to define the nature of activities undertaken within the castle. The evidence has been discussed below by theme.

Building fabric

Relatively few finds could be linked to the fabric of the medieval castle. Most numerous were sherds of roof slate. However, as all the pieces were found in 20th-century levelling layers and all are of the same lithological type as those currently roofing the castle, it seems likely that the pieces relate to recent restoration work. No sherds bearing nail or peg holes were found, a feature generally diagnostic of date (peg holes being expected of original slates, nail holes of

20th-century work), but it seems likely that all represent offcuts from the recent slating work. Thus no evidence at all survives of the original roof. While it might be expected that the castle would have been extensively quarried for building materials after its abandonment, the complete absence of archaeological trace of original roofing material does suggest it was roofed in some non-durable material such as thatch or wooden shingles.

Window glass was present with two pieces that are likely to derive from the early castle buildings, others being obviously of modern origin. Both early pieces were in poor condition: dark, opaque and crystallising, probably potash fluxed glass which is prone to destabilisation. They were 1.6mm to 1.7mm thick, although may originally have been thicker. Both were found in Trench 2, adjacent to the current chapel, a fragment in a levelling deposit, and a larger sherd redeposited in the topsoil. Window glass did not come into common use in Scotland until the 17th century (Turnbull 2001: 53). Before this its use was largely limited to ecclesiastical buildings. These may derive from original castle glazing, possibly in the castle chapel – although the original chapel is thought to be on the west side of the courtyard.

The land snail assemblage also provided some insights into the provenance of building materials. In general, the snail species present were consistent with standing buildings and associated yards. *Lauria cylindrica* is well known on mortared walls and *Oxychilus cellarius* gets its Latin name from its habit of turning up in caves, cellars and other underground places such as crevices in rubble. *Clausilia bidentata* is another common component of rock/wall assemblages. The presence of *Cochlicella acuta* in two contexts is interesting. This species is very closely associated with coastal calcareous sand habitats and in Barra this will mean the west coast dunes and machair. It is not a likely component of the life assemblage in the castle and could be an import with shell sand, possibly used for mortar (Walker 2012; Stephen Carter pers comm).

The only other building components were a handful of fragments of iron nails, found in

the Gokman's House floor deposits, and in later levelling and topsoil deposits in Trenches 1 and 9. It is likely that they derive from the construction of, or repairs to, the wooden fixtures and fittings. However, they are too few and too fragmentary to provide any evidence for their exact use.

The only finds which could be described as building tools were two hammerstones. Both were makeshift tools, unmodified quartzite beach pebbles, available locally and selected for their hardness, size and shape. Both fit well in the hand. Both were pitted from use to varying degrees. While the castle builders no doubt had access to an array of more sophisticated metal tools, these simple tools, possibly used for one job and then discarded, are all that remains.

Industry

The only surviving evidence for industry predominantly pointed towards ironworking and it was mainly concentrated in the Gokman's House, indicating that the structure probably functioned as a smithy at some point in its history. The ironworking waste was found in the upper two floor layers, which can be dated by associated finds to the early 17th century. As the construction of the Gokman's House has been dated to the 16th century, and the name itself implies the dwelling of a domestic sentinel or warder, the evidence points towards this being a secondary use for the structure. Possibly it was this change of function which occasioned the construction of the Gokman's House extension in the 17th century. Lesser quantities of ironworking waste, as well as a whetstone, were found redeposited in levelling deposits in Trench 1. The whetstone was made of intermediate gneiss. While this stone would naturally have fallen into rectangular sectioned pieces, useful as whetstone rough-outs, the coarse grain of the stone is not ideal for the purpose, but it is available in local outcrops.

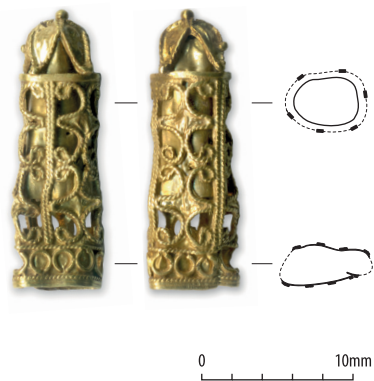
The relatively small volume of ironworking waste (703g) might indicate only occasional use for building ironwork and repairs, although it is possible that the smithy was used on a more regular basis for on-going maintenance, boat repair, or the forging or repair of weapons or armour.

The only evidence present for products of this smithy are in the form of a handful of nails and a rove plate. Rove plates were small (typically about 25mm across) lozenge- (or parallelogram-) shaped plates of iron with central perforations. They were used in conjunction with nails to form clench bolts to join two or more thicknesses of wood together. The plate was fitted over the protruding tip of the nail shaft which was then clenched over to form a secure join (Goodall 1990: 329). A rove was found in the uppermost floor surface. A further two plates were also found in lower deposits in Trenches 3 and 10. One of these was still attached to a small piece of nail shaft indicating this was a broken bolt. The other two appear to be unused, although they may have fallen off or been removed or dropped during repair work. Rove plates were used in the construction of doors, shutters and other such fittings, but in this context it is perhaps more noteworthy that they were used during boat building. Boats were obviously a necessity at the island castle and important to maintain the seafaring power of the MacNeills. Latterly they were stored in the Boat House but earlier they were probably hauled into the castle courtyard itself. It is likely that repair work would also have been undertaken here, including the forging of new rove plates.

Evidence for the forging or fitting of horseshoes is notably absent. In fact there is no evidence at all for the presence of horses at the castle, in terms of horse harness fittings, bones or environmental remains. Horses were no doubt stabled nearby on the mainland. Boats were probably of greater worth in terms of travelling in this island landscape.

Gold lace tag

This tiny and beautiful find is c 18mm long and 5mm diameter and can be readily identified as a lace tag, albeit an unusually ornate one (SF6, Illus 9). It was recovered from the castle-period midden deposit (C1065) during the wet sieving of soil samples. It was the only clothing-related evidence recovered from the site. Lace tags, or points or aglets as they were known, served to bind the end of laces, to prevent fraying and ease threading. They are common enough



ILLUS 9 Gold lace tag

finds in midden deposits of the 15th and 16th centuries but are almost exclusively rather plain items, made from rolled sheets of copper alloy, occasionally with simple pressed decoration (Margeson 1993: 23; Egan & Forsyth 1997: 225; Cox 1998: 791). From the early 16th century their use expanded beyond the functional to the purely ornamental, with tags of precious metal used like jewels and attached to garments for decorative effect on both male and female dress. However, these highly decorative gold tags, although often depicted in portraiture, are extremely rarely found in archaeological deposits. One other has recently come to light in Wing, Buckinghamshire, under the Portable Antiquities Scheme (Lewis 2012: 321–2; PAS database BUC-E33633) which shares many stylistic similarities to the Kisimul tag.

The Kisimul tag was constructed entirely of gold with a thin sheet cylinder running up the centre and with an outer shell of delicate openwork filigree. The domed end was decorated with four petals around a single bead. The sides were divided into three rectangular panels delineated by double rows of twisted wire. Each was decorated with four identical spiralled scrolls, possibly stylised 'E's. The border at the rim was again defined by twisted wire edging and features eight rings. Two of these rings on opposite sides are holed to allow the piece to be sewn onto a garment or lace.

It was found within a deposit built up against the basal course of the tower wall. It was slightly

flattened, but otherwise in remarkably good condition. All the available dating evidence is in agreement with the 16th-century typological dating for this find. It clearly must post-date the castle's early 15th-century construction. Animal bone from the same deposit was dated to AD 1482–1646 (GU-27054). It was probably deposited after falling from the garment to which it was attached.

Considering the workmanship in this tiny find and that the garment to which it belonged undoubtedly bore many more such examples, it must have belonged to a person of considerable wealth and status, possibly the MacNeill himself or his wife, or a distinguished visitor.

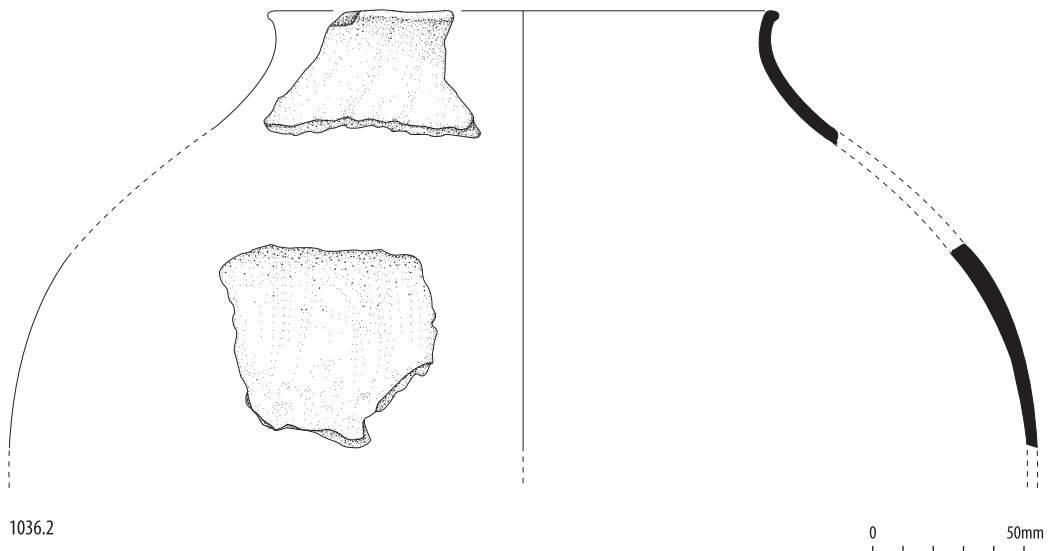
Craggan wares

The site provided a good assemblage of craggan wares, representing as many as 64 vessels (Illus 10). For the most part these followed the traditional form of hand-made rounded jars with narrow necks and everted or upright rims. The assemblage can be dated by associated radiocarbon dates (GU-27054, GU-27055, Table 1) and other wheel-thrown wares to between the 15th and 17th centuries, which broadly fits with the accepted dating of the castle's occupation. The assemblage is

comparable in terms of dating with the craggan wares of Breachacha Castle, Coll (Turner & Dunbar 1970: 182–5), and Druim nan Dearcag, North Uist (Campbell 1997). The Breachacha assemblage is also comparable in terms of the social strata of the site's occupation and indicates the use of this type of pottery was not limited to blackhouses and shielings.

Much has been written about the craggan ware tradition of the Highlands and Islands (Holleyman 1947; Quail 1979; Cheape 1988; 1993). At Kisimul they were the only cooking vessels from the castle-period assemblage, although it seems likely that the castle kitchen was also furnished with metal skillets, cauldrons and other vessels as they were in common use in mainland Scotland by this period. Having a value as scrap, however, metal vessels are comparatively rarely found in archaeological deposits. The distribution of castle-period deposits and the complicated depositional history meant that the distribution of craggans could not be demonstrated as centering on the kitchen area, although many of the sherds show clear sooting from use over a fire.

The late survival of the craggan tradition into the 20th century has afforded opportunity to record much detail about the production and use



ILLUS 10 Craggan pot

of the vessels. Although there is little variation in form, the variation in size noted in craggan wares in general, from as small as 9cm high to as large as 24cm (Cheape 1993: 116), indicates an array of different uses. These included for milking, boiling milk or meat, parching grain, storage of ale, milk, butter and cheese and the preparation and storage of fish oil for lighting (Cheape 1988: 16–23; 1993: 122–5). The medicinal and restorative properties of warm milk from a craggan were particularly remarked upon (Cheape 1993: 125). This kind of usage is consistent with heat damage and sooting on the exterior and occasionally interior of the sherds found. The rounded base meant that heat was distributed more evenly around the walls. The everted rim allowed a cover of sheepskin to be tied on with a leather thong for storage purposes (Cheape 1988: 21).

Craggan wares were known to have been made in only a few areas spread throughout the islands, wherever suitable clay deposits were found, and it is likely that only a few families were involved, passing down techniques from mother to daughter (Cheape 1993: 126). Production was known in western Lewis, the north of Skye and on Tiree (Cheape 1988: 9). Although other centres may well have existed in earlier times, the latter two are within easy reach of Barra.

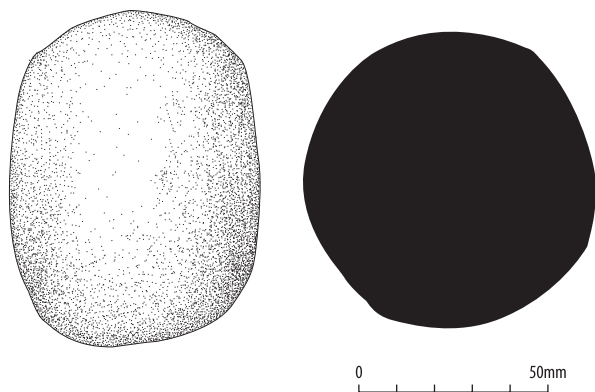
Other kitchen equipment and table wares

These were predominantly represented by ceramic jugs and dishes, although other materials would also have been used. Wooden and pewter drinking vessels, ewers and dishes were in common use at the time, with silver and glass probably used for the lord's table. There would also have been wooden barrels and buckets, but no wooden or metal vessels were found. There was one tiny fragment of vessel glass, recovered from a disturbed prehistoric deposit (Trench 7, C1034 (Illus 6)). During the 16th and 17th centuries, fine glass drinking vessels were a considerable luxury (Wilmott 2002: 32) and would have been imported from the Low Countries or possibly even from Venice.

The pottery also provided useful data about trade routes and supply lines to the castle because where pottery travelled it is likely it accompanied other, more lucrative cargoes. The pottery was all of types commonly traded in north-west Europe at the time.

Notable is the relative scarcity of mainland Scottish wares compared to a contemporary mainland assemblage. This is perhaps not surprising given the distance from the contemporary centres of pottery production in southern and eastern Scotland, the relatively (to Europe at least) low quality of Scottish pottery at the time and the local popularity of the Hebridean craggan tradition. Two Scottish jugs were represented by single sherds: one of 15th- or 16th-century Scottish late whiteware (Franklin 2011: 44) and one of 16th- or 17th-century Scottish post-medieval reduced ware (Haggarty et al 2011: 13–21). These are ubiquitous types on mainland sites of the period, but appear to have been considerably more novel in Barra. The local Hebridean pottery tradition did not include jugs and thus it can be assumed that liquid was more commonly stored and transported in wooden vessels. The jugs were a little plain but may have been used for serving beer, storing milk or holding water for washing.

Smaller and less porous jugs were also present and these would have been more useful for serving wine or spirits. These all came from



ILLUS 11 Stone rubber

the continent, including two stoneware examples from the Rhineland and two late green-glazed Saintonge jugs. Saintonge wares have been traditionally associated with the Gascon wine trade (Hurst et al 1986: 76) and here they form a visible marker of the supply of French wine to the site.

Drinking vessels, as well as the glass vessel noted above, were represented by two cups or mugs of 17th-century English pottery. One is simply brown glazed, the other of decorative

Staffordshire-type combed slipware (Barker & Crompton 2007: 43).

Colourful serving dishes in ceramic were also imported. Two dishes were made of Anglo-Dutch tin-glazed earthenware, two of Northern French Beauvais yellow-glazed earthenware (Haggarty 2006: file 26).

It is also likely that goods were arriving from Spain. Although no sherds were found at Kisimul, a Spanish costrel found at the contemporary Breachacha Castle on Coll is

TABLE 3

Animal species present in deposits related to castle occupation

<i>Species</i>	<i>Number of identifiable bones</i>
Cattle	74
Sheep/goat	61
Sheep	8
Whale	7
Pig	3
Dog	1
Vole/mouse	7
Indeterminate large mammal (cattle/horse/large deer)	69
Indeterminate medium mammal (sheep/goat/pig/small deer)	46
Indeterminate small mammal (mammals smaller than a cat, eg rodents)	8
Unidentified	365
<i>Mammal Total</i>	<i>649</i>
–	–
Duck	1
Goose	1
Grouse family	1
Indeterminate bird	6
<i>Bird Total</i>	<i>9</i>
–	–
Haddock/herring	351
Salmon?	123
Smelt?	90
Cod	6
Indeterminate fish	17
<i>Fish Total</i>	<i>587</i>
Total	1,245

possibly indicative of a Hebridean trade in Spanish wine, olives, olive oil or honey (Hurst 1970).

The only other item of kitchen equipment was a stone rubber (SF1 (Illus 11)). This was a quartzite tool, well made and well used, and would have been suitable for grinding mustard, spices or other ingredients. Its find spot in the courtyard, in the Gokman's House (Trench 2), and peck marks on its surface suggest latter reuse as a building tool.

Food

Most of the evidence for the food consumed came from the bone assemblage (Tommasino-Suárez 2011), supplemented by marine shells and charred plant remains (Power 2012).

Animal species represented were fairly typical of this period in Scotland (Coleman & Photos-Jones 2008; Barclay & Ritchie 2010; White & Connell 2010). The exploitation of marine resources including fish and marine mammals was also characteristic of the Outer Hebrides since at least the Iron Age (Barber 2003) (see Table 3 for summary of species present).

The main meats consumed during the castle period were beef and mutton. It is unlikely that livestock was kept on the castle island in numbers for any period of time, although cows may have been kept at the castle to supply fresh milk. Most of the provisions would have been brought to the site from Barra. Some of these provisions may have been transported on the hoof and slaughtered at the castle itself. The heads of cattle and the trunks of sheep/goats were generally discarded after slaughter and are unlikely to appear at a purely consumer site. The cuts of meat represented in the Kisimul assemblage supports the idea that cattle were sometimes – although by no means always – slaughtered in the castle but that sheep/goats were mostly brought from Barra. Filleting seems to have been carried out at the castle, and some medium specimens may have been cooked on the bone without major butchery being practised.

The majority of butchery marks found on the bone assemblage showed a low degree of

butcher specialisation, carried out using less than ideal tools or by people inexperienced in their task. This is consistent with the rural nature of Barra at the time, where it might be supposed that there were few specialist butchers and that slaughter and butchery were often undertaken by individual crofters.

Both cattle and sheep were usually slaughtered at their optimum age for beef or mutton exploitation. However, a significant number of specimens from both species were killed either earlier or later than this optimum age. Earlier would imply a consequence of culling for breeding or dairying purposes but would provide choice cuts of lamb and veal for the lord's table and feast days. Later implies animals were exploited for milk, wool and labour before being slaughtered. The resulting meat would have been of inferior quality, probably for the lower end of the castle's social strata. Both species would also have been exploited for their hides. This was supported by the butchery marks, seen particularly on cattle bones, characteristic of skinning as well as meat exploitation.

Pigs were less exploited in the castle, as is typical in most of Scotland at the period (Ewart 2003; Coleman & Photos-Jones 2008; Barclay & Ritchie 2010). The occurrence of this species was too limited to draw any conclusions regarding its consumption and husbandry.

The bird species represented, both domestic and fowl, were again of commonly exploited types (Tommasino-Suárez 2011). Duck or mallard and goose are water birds usually consumed to complement the diet and to obtain other products for daily life (such as eggs or feathers) (Adamson 2004). The presence of grouse implies that some fowling may have been carried out in the vicinity of the castle and may have been an activity enjoyed by the higher status inhabitants of the site.

A curious absence is the lack of any evidence for the consumption of deer. They would surely have been available on Barra and hunting was a standard lordly pastime of the age. A single dog bone was recovered, although it is not clear if this derived from a hunting dog, guard dog or herd dog.

Fish exploited include haddock, cod, smelt and salmon. The latter may have been caught at sea or on Barra. It is likely that many of the fish specimens were caught on site using the fish trap to the east of the boat landing (Holden 2017). All the fish seem to have been brought to the castle whole, whether fresh or dried, producing an assemblage that contained skull, trunk and tail elements.

Whales, seals and otters were also utilised in the Outer Hebrides (Mulville 2002; Barber 2003) but the presence of whale scapula fragments is the only evidence for this at Kisimul. Whales were used for meat, and their blubber used as food as well as oil for lighting, while the bones were also used as raw materials. It is not clear whether the whale was obtained through whaling or through the exploitation of a beached animal.

Shellfish remains found are also likely to be from species exploited for food and they would have been freely available on the castle island as well as the neighbouring Barra shore. Winkles, cockles and limpets were particularly common, while whelks, oysters, razors, crabs and mussels were also present.

Plant remains were less numerous and none from the later period were from dated contexts. However, some remains were identified in Trenches 2 and 6 in layers likely to belong to the period of the castle's occupation (Power 2012). The cereal assemblage included oat and rye grains and although much of the grain was poorly preserved, many of the barley grains were distinctly angular rather than rounded, features that are characteristic of hulled barley. These are in keeping with typical cereal assemblages found on Scottish sites of the period and would have been brought to the island from Barra. The presence of whole grains might imply that flour was milled within the castle, although given the likely scale of the castle's consumption of this staple, it seems more probable that the majority of flour was milled elsewhere. Evidence for wild foodstuff was also present in the form of charred hazel nutshell fragments. Although common on mainland Scotland, hazel bushes are not common

on Barra today and thus the nuts may well have been imported from elsewhere.

The food remains show exploitation of most of the resources that would have been available in the local environs on Barra and even on the castle island itself. Both land and sea were exploited, as were domestic and wild species. They also imply a certain social hierarchy. Veal, lamb and game birds such as grouse were destined for the high-status inhabitants of the castle or for feasting, while the tougher meat that came from older specimens may have been eaten by servants that worked in the castle. It seems likely that at least one cow was kept for the production of milk at the castle itself.

SUMMARY OF THE EVIDENCE FOR THE CASTLE PERIOD

The archaeological evidence for life at the castle provides many insights into the lifestyle of its inhabitants. They consumed staples of beef, mutton, barley, oats and rye, supplemented by pork, duck, goose, fish, whale, cockles, winkles, limpets, oysters, crabs and other shellfish. Some also enjoyed luxuries such as grouse, lamb and veal. Fresh milk was undoubtedly available from the castle cow and French wine would have been stored in barrels in the buttery. The high status of the castle and its residents is evident from the gold lace tag and chapel with glazed windows as well as the rich diet. The importance of seafaring is visible, with the castle's own smith working on site to produce fittings for boat repair and probably other items as well.

The castle was very much rooted in its Hebridean setting and traditions. Most of the products consumed therein would have come from the immediate environs of Barra. Local meat, local stones used for tools, and craggan pottery with no doubt local superstitions about the efficacy of these pots. But the supply lines for the castle also relied on trading links with the Scottish mainland, the Low Countries, the Rhineland and France, possibly even Spain and Italy. Of course, given the reputation of the MacNeills of Barra, it is entirely possible that some of these goods were acquired through raiding rather than trading.

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