

Cnoc nan Gall, Colonsay: Historic Environment Scotland Human Remains Call-Off Contract Data Structure Report

AOC 23956-8
31st October 2018



ARCHAEOLOGY

HERITAGE

CONSERVATION

Cnoc nan Gall, Colonsay: HES Human Remains Call-Off Contract Data Structure Report

On Behalf of: Historic Environment Scotland,
Longmore House
Salisbury Place
Edinburgh
EH9 1SH

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Prepared by: Stuart Wilson

Illustrations by: Sam O'Leary

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This document has been prepared in accordance with AOC standard operating procedures.

Author: Stuart Wilson

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Approved by: Lindsay Dunbar

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Draft/Final Report Stage:

Date:

Enquiries to: AOC Archaeology Group
Edgefield Industrial Estate
Edgefield Road
Loanhead
EH20 9SY

Tel. 0131 440 3593
Fax. 0131 440 3422
e-mail. admin@aocarchaeology.com



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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Project background

1.1.1 A member of the public recovered some bone fragments and two teeth from a burial mound at Cnoc nan Gall, on the island of Colonsay. The bone fragments and teeth have been confirmed as human and the find spot is known to be a Bronze Age burial mound with later Viking Age interments. The burial mound at Cnoc nan Gall (NGR c.NR 3587 9341) was subject to an earlier Human Remains Call-Off Contract investigation conducted in 2010 by GUARD after erosion had exposed some human remains. GUARD recorded the partially articulated remains of one adult individual with grave goods along with disarticulated fragments of a skull and a vertebra of a second individual, probably a child, were recovered from the erosion face. The current finds derive from the erosion face and this intervention plans to fully record the disturbed burial through excavation and to conduct a comprehensive topographical and condition survey of the burial mound to hopefully aid with the formulation of a long-term strategy to deal with the ongoing erosion issues of this site.

1.2 Archaeological background

1.2.1 The site lies within open machair c. 250 north of Colonsay Airfield. To the northeast stands Beinn nan Caorach and surrounding smaller hills. To the west and southwest the rocky seashore is only a few hundred metres away and the bay of Traigh an Tobair Fhuair. The Bronze Age mound appears to be constructed on a natural rise accentuating the height of the mound and making it clearly visible from most approaches.

1.2.2 The HRCC excavation by GUARD in summer 2010 found the following,

'The partially articulated remains of one individual, possibly a middle-aged male (35-49 years), and disarticulated fragments of a skull and a vertebra of a second individual, probably a child (3-12 years), were recovered from the erosion face, suggesting that further remains and probably other burials are present on the dune. The adult was found accompanied by grave goods comprising a bronze ringed pin together with a deposit of organic material, an iron object (possibly a knife) and a bone pin, a fragment of textile and an as yet unidentified mass which may be the remains of a bag or pouch.' (GUARD 2010).

1.2.3 Elsewhere in the immediate vicinity there are a few known sites of note. This includes a small Viking Age settlement excavated in 1977-78, c.150 m to the SSW of the burial site (HES No. NR39SE 47). The settlement comprised four circular structures constructed with interior kerbing of upright stone slabs. Hearths were found in three of the four structures, along with a variety of artefacts including a saddle quern, bone needles, worked whalebone, iron knives and other objects. A flexed inhumation had been placed within a cist 14 m to the ESE of the structures and, although only the lower (north-eastern) half of the skeleton survived, a number of grave goods were recovered along with the remains of a small dog. The finds included a bronze ringed pin and a fragment of a decorated sheet of bronze, along with iron objects. Radiocarbon dates of c AD 800 were obtained

for both the skeleton and animal bone recovered from the settlement, suggesting that they were contemporary.

- 1.2.4 To the North there was a Viking ship burial excavated in 1891 (HES No. NR39SE 26) which states,

'A Viking boat burial was excavated by Sir John McNeill near Machrins Farm (NR 367 933) in August, 1891. The mound, which lay north-south, was one of several just north of where the angle of a stone wall projects into the golf course. It was a rough oval, c.30' by 20' and 7' in maximum height, of shell sand with occasional slabs of schist which were deduced to have been used to stabilise the mound. The whole was turf-covered except on the south where the turf-skin had been broken and erosion had left a nearly circular hollow. As well as the usual boat rivets, an iron pot, an iron axe-head and portions of a sword were found as well as the skeleton of a horse with its bridle-bit, portions of shield bosses, part of a lance-head, an amber bead, a penannular bronze brooch and a bronze pin. The arms had been deliberately mutilated before deposition. What was interpreted as a cooking hearth was also found.

No trace of this feature survives.

- 1.2.5 To the east a short distance from the site there are records of the discovery of a series of cist burials in the 1920's (HES No. NR39SE 87). A lot of information has been lost, and the location is not definitive but the cists were probably early Christian.

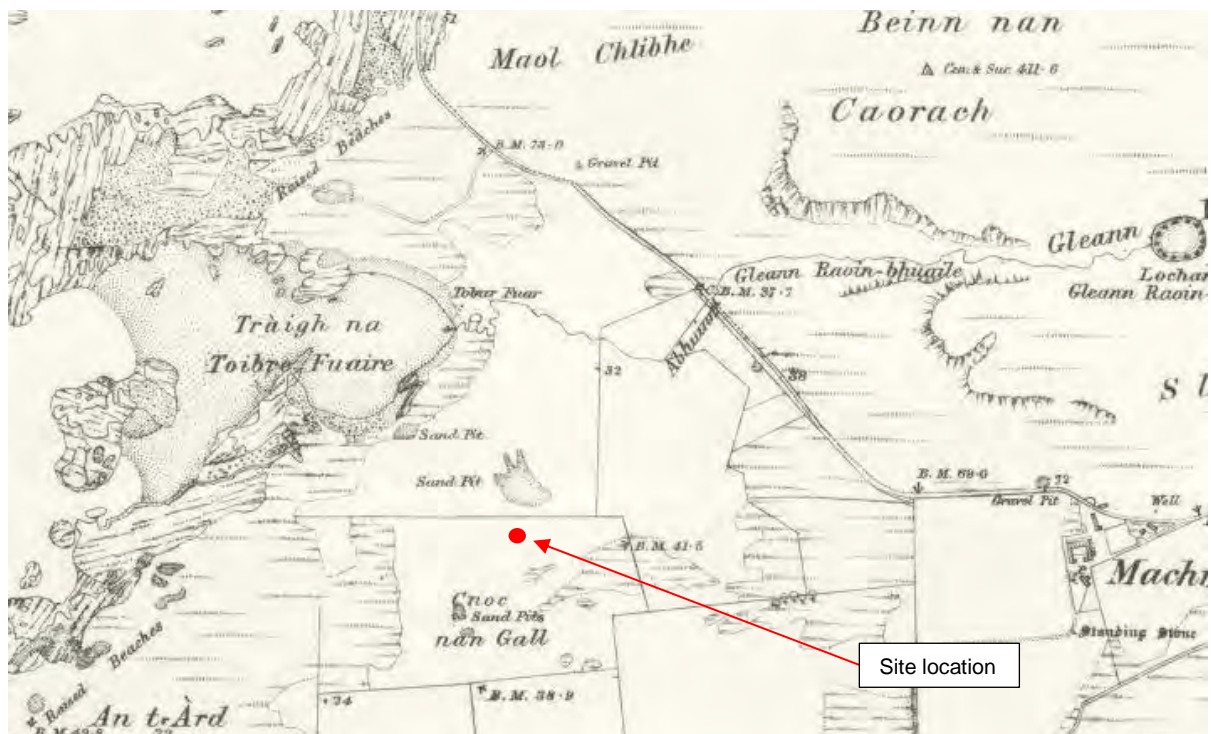


Figure 5 1st Edition Ordnance survey map

- 1.2.6 The 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map extract shown in Fig. 5 reveals that the site lies within an area of long established farmland.

2 OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 The objectives of the archaeological works set out in the Project Design (Dunbar 2018) were to conduct the works over a three day period to ensure adequate time to complete the excavation and survey. The on-site works were conducted according to AOC Archaeology Group's standard operating procedures but specifically include the following:
- i) Pre-excavation photography undertaken of both the general area of the find spot as well as detailed views of features to establish both the condition and the parameters of the site.
 - ii) Visual inspection of the immediate vicinity to determine the possibility of further remains and written record of the feature and immediate area, including details of the nature and extent of the archaeological remains present and a description of the disturbance with reference to the process at work.
 - iii) Topographic survey of the immediate vicinity
 - iv) All artefacts and human remains lifted and removed from site
 - v) Location survey of the position of the excavation.
 - vi) Backfilling of site and replacing of turf where appropriate
 - vii) Post excavation photography of site upon completion of works

3 METHODOLOGY

- 3.1 Upon arrival, the exact location where the human remains were found was indicated by Dr David Binnie, from the island medical practice.
- 3.2 Prior to any archaeological works taking place a photographic survey of the site was completed to show the sites current state and a metal detector was used to scan the exposed area for any small finds.
- 3.3 The general area was subjected to a visual inspection, initially within the immediate vicinity of the remains. This was eventually extended to a general inspection of the entire site as far as the base of the slope. The exposed section face of the mound was cleaned and inspected for possible grave cuts and further skeletal remains.
- 3.3 A small trench measuring 1 m wide by 2 metres long was opened around the remains as they were located amongst a deposit of large flat stones which possibly may have formed part of a cist burial. Mid excavation photography was completed at all stages of excavation.
- 3.4 A topographic survey of the entire mound was completed along with the location of the trench, the remains and all stones revealed during the topsoil strip.

- 3.5 All visible skeletal remains were removed and the section cleaned back to ensure no further remains were in danger of exposure in the near future.
- 3.6 Following the excavation, recording and recovery of the human bone the trench was backfilled and reinstated.

4 RESULTS

- 4.1 The archaeological works took place over a three day period in mainly very windy conditions with frequent spells of moderate to heavy rain. Despite conditions the visibility was considered good allowing for the retrieval of the remains. The burial mound was located on an area of machair and sand dunes currently used as a golf course to the west of Machrins and to the north of the airport landing strip for Colonsay (Plate 1).



Plate 1: General view of site

- 4.2 The burial mound is a unique feature compared to the low lying machair of the surrounding area (c. 15m AOD) (GUARD 2018). Upon arrival the site showed a considerable degree of erosion caused by wind which has left an overhanging lip of machair turf. A number of locals have also confirmed that sheep have been using these areas as shelters further adding to the erosion of the mound. Upon closer inspection of the area where the remains were discovered it was apparent that a number of rabbit holes either side of the remains as well as behind had further undermined the mound (Plate 2).



Plate 2: Pre-excavation showing remains location

- 4.3 The remains discovered were found to be unstratified consisting mainly of cranium fragments with an assortment of long bone fragments that could not be identified in their current state. As the remains were found to be continuing into the section it was necessary to open a small area around the remains so that the existing stones could be lifted to determine the extent of the skeleton.
- 4.4 The mound comprised of a topsoil of machair measuring 0.31m thick which overlay a compacted deposit of organic rich sand and shell measuring 0.07m thick. Within this deposit were a number of large flat sub angular stones measuring between 0.2 – 0.7m long by 0.3 - 0.5m wide. During initial cleaning of the section surrounding the remains two upstanding stones were discovered. These were initially thought to be the outside wall of a cist but upon opening the trench this was proven otherwise (Plate 3 & 4). Beneath this was a deposit of mid light brown sand of moderate compaction measuring 0.42m thick which contained all the remains. This deposit may have been part of the original grave fill but has been heavily altered by rabbit activity. Under this was a deposit of mid yellow moderately compacted sand, likely

a disturbed subsoil created by rabbit activity. The natural subsoil at the base was a yellow lightly compacted sand.



Plate 3: Post excavation shot of trench from the northwest



Plate 4: Post excavation shot from the southwest

- 4.5 The individual condition of the bone was excellent but the overall completion of the skeleton was very poor. The remains were entirely disarticulated and centred around two separate clusters likely pulled out from inside the mound during rabbit burrowing. Initial observations suggest the location and approximate age of the skeleton suggest the remains may be a

continuation of the remains of the adolescent recovered from the mound section by GUARD in 2010 (Plate 5).



Plate 5: Mid excavation shot showing human remains

- 4.6 Once the trench had been fully recorded two of the northwest stones were lifted to allow recovery of the remains. Once removed the area was cleaned back to ensure that no further remains were present within the area and at risk of exposure in the near future. The areas surrounding the two 'bone clusters' were sampled.



Plate 6: Excavation area following reinstatement

- 4.7 A topographical survey of the site was also completed to record the location of the remains, the extent of the site and measure the degree of erosion that had occurred since the last visit by GUARD in 2008.
- 4.8 Upon completion of all archaeology works the trench was backfilled and the turf reinstated where possible. The site was photographed post excavation as a record for any future works required (Plate 6).

5 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 The survey and recording of the location of the human remains were completed as per the approved '*Project Design*' (Dunbar 2018).
- 5.2 The bones recovered represent the disarticulated remains of at least one individual caused by rabbit burrowing. Their exposure was likely caused by wind erosion and considering their location and approximate age they are possibly part of the same individual partially recovered by the works completed by GUARD in 2010. The remains were not considered to be *in-situ* nor were any small finds discovered during the works which means assigning a period to these remains is not possible at this time.
- 5.3 No further remains or obvious burials were seen on site, however considering the erosion processes acting upon the mound it is possible future works may be required.

6 REFERENCES

- Becket, L. 2008 *Cnoc nan Gall, Colonsay, Human remains Call Off Contract: Data Structure Report*. GUARD Unpublished literature
- Dunbar, L. 2018 *Cnoc nan Gall, Colonsay. Historic Environment Scotland Human Remains Call-off Contract Project Design*. AOC Unpublished literature

7 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

AOC would like to thank the residents of Colonsay for their hospitality and aid they provided the team throughout the works. Special thanks to Colonsay Heritage trust for their support and information provided.

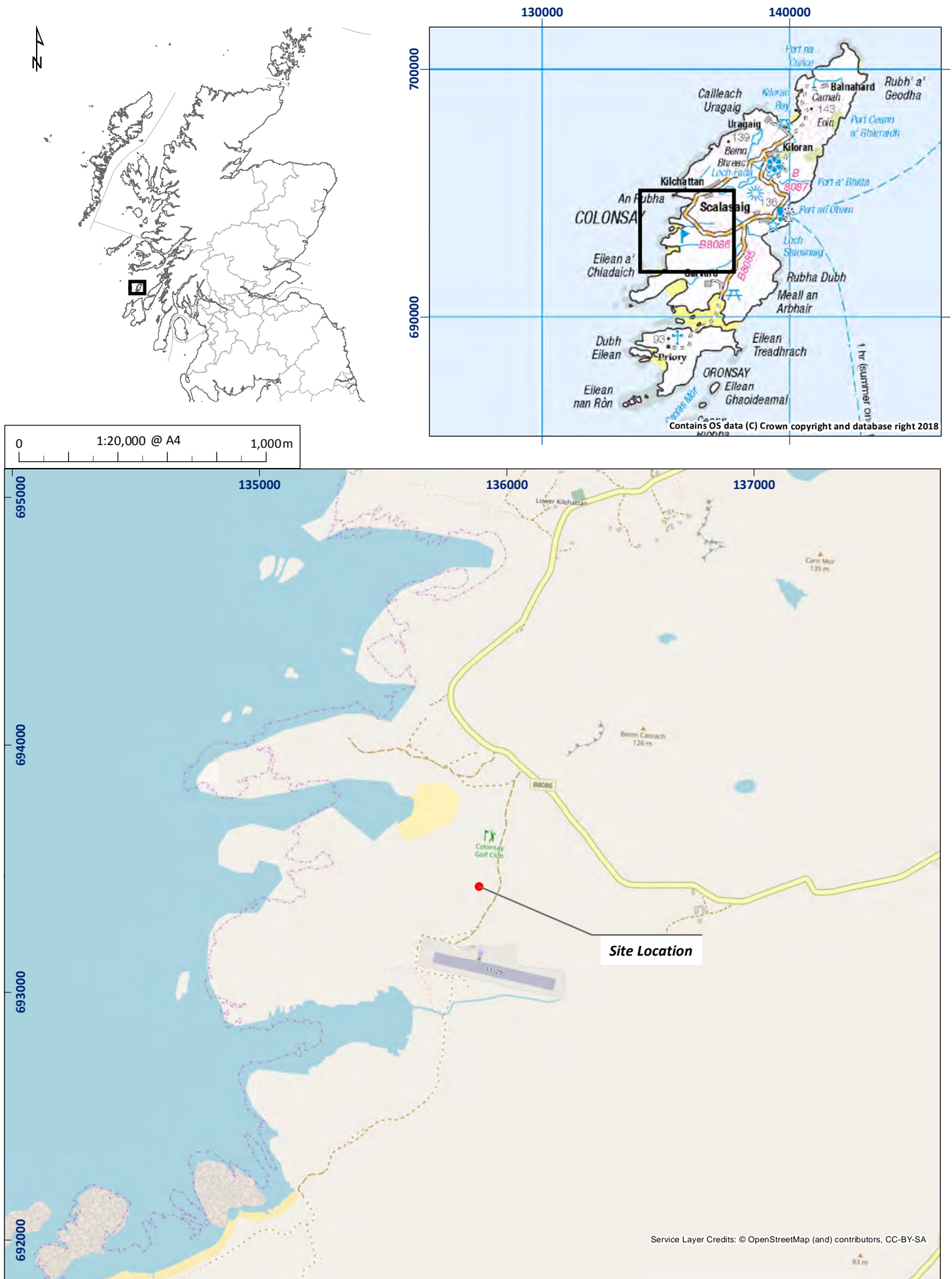
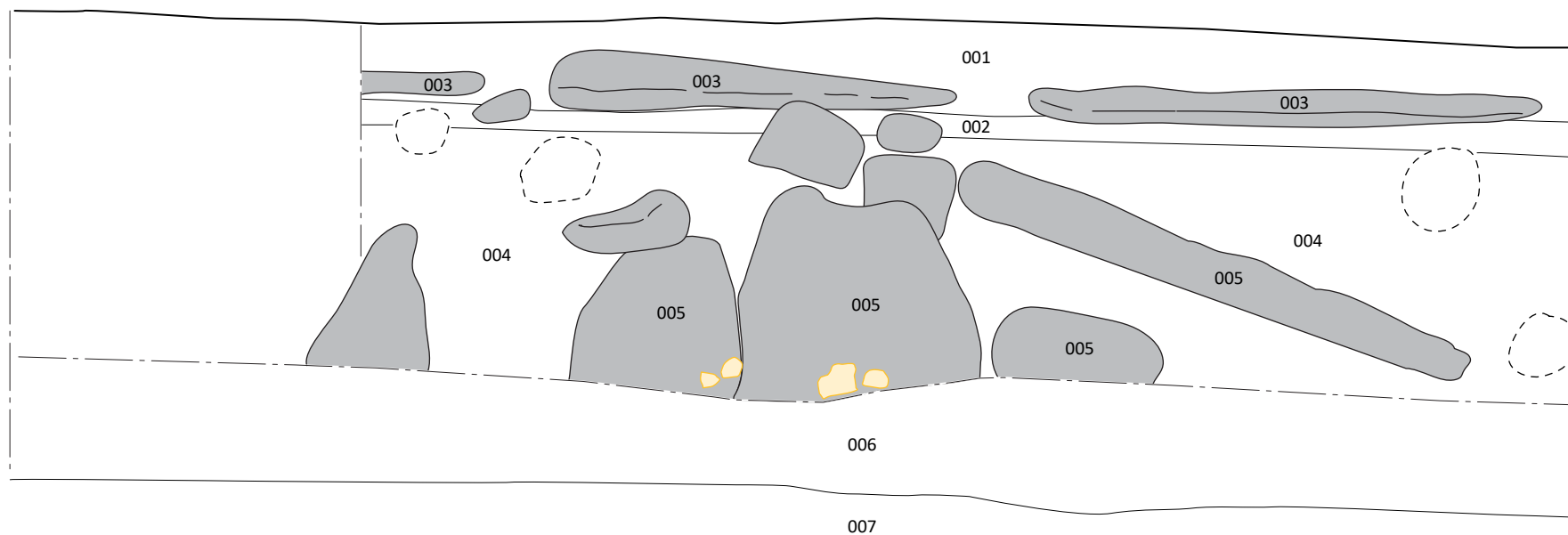


Figure 1: Site location plan

01/23956-8/REP/01/01

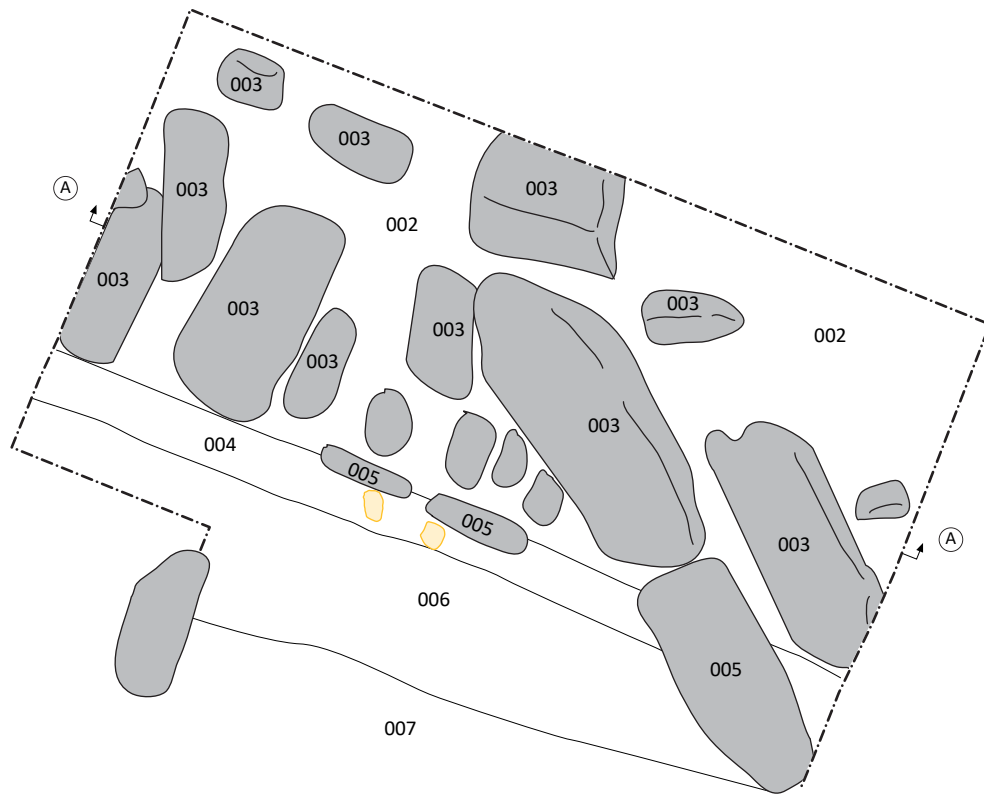


Key

- Stone
- Bone fragment
- Bioturbation

0 1:10 0.5m

Figure 2: Profile of Trench



Key

- Stone
- Bone fragment
- Ⓐ Ⓐ Section location

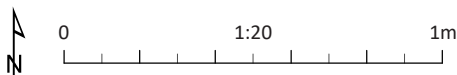


Figure 3: Plan of Trench

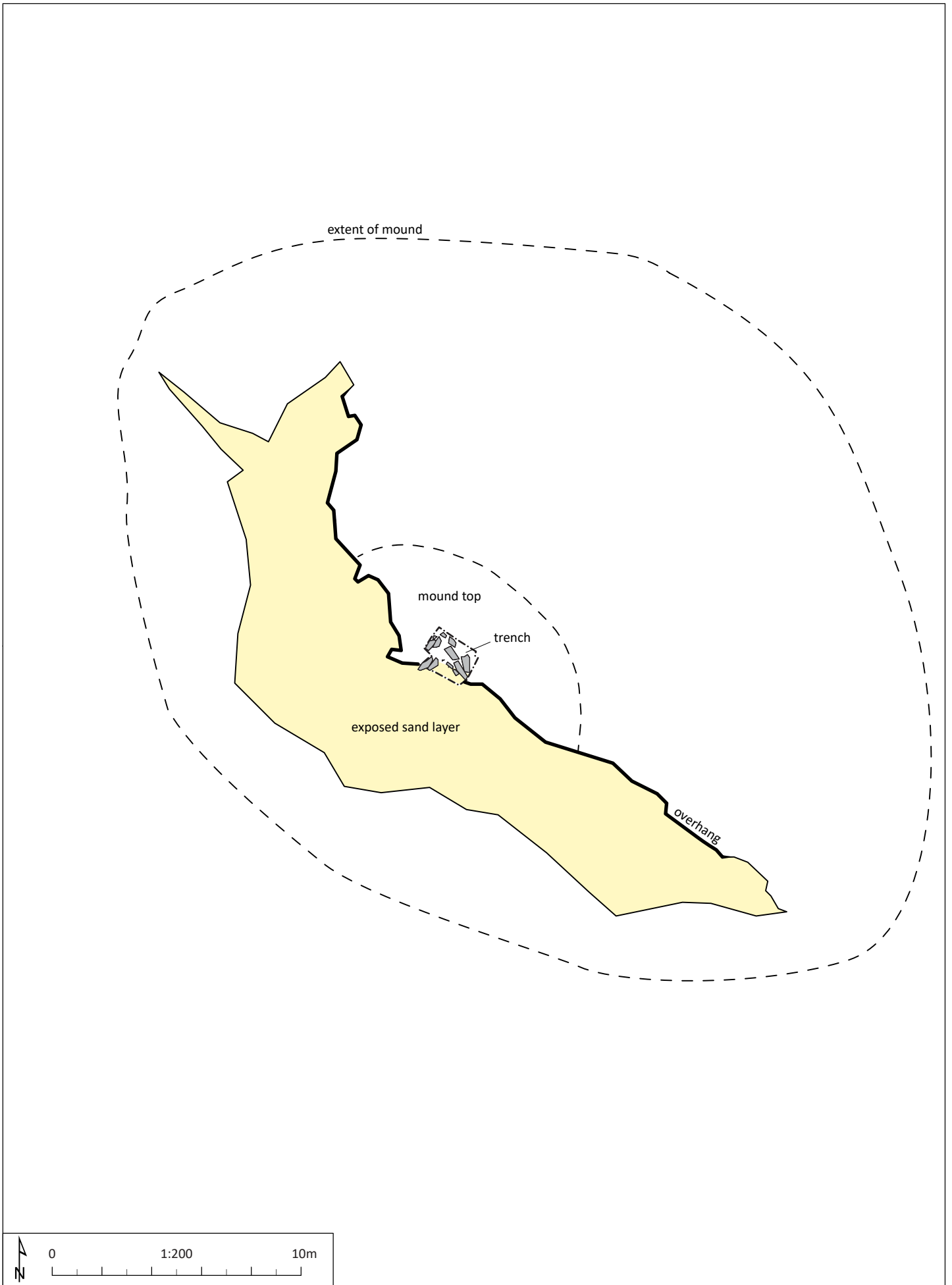


Figure 4: Survey plan

Appendix 1 - Context Register

Context No.	Description
[001]	Machair turf, roots and light brown sand moderately compacted measuring 0.31m thick. Topsoil
[002]	Deposit of shell and mid brown sand, moderately compacted measuring 0.07m thick. Deposit
[003]	Arrangement of stones within and under [002] possibly forming cover for mound. Measuring between 0.2m -0.7m long by 0.3m to 0.5m wide. Sub angular and do not appear to form any obvious structure. Deposit
[004]	Mid light brown sand underlying [002] and [003]. Moderately compacted measuring 0.41m thick containing shell and very occasional sub rounded pebbles. Contained the remains (SF 1 & SF2). Deposit
[005]	Large angular upstanding stones at northwest extent of trench, possibly forming part of a disturbed cist. Measuring between 0.3m to 0.6m long by 0.2m to 0.3m wide. Sub angular in appearance roughly orientated NE-SE. Structure??
[006]	Mid yellow deposit of sand, loosely compacted with occasional shell and sub rounded pebble. Likely created during rabbit activity. Deposit
[007]	Light yellow sand, very loose with occasional small rounded pebble and shells. Natural

Appendix 2 - Photographic Register

Photo No.	Description	Taken from
1-27	Site location / pre-ex shots	Various
29-38	Close up showing eroded edge of site	Various
39	Close up showing eroded edge	NW
40	Site of remains at distance	NW
41-48	Close up of exposed remains	NW
49-51	Mid ex shots after removal of over hang	NW
52	Mid e shots of remains after cleaning	NW
53-55	Mid ex shot of area after removal of over hang from above	SW
56-57	Shot showing remains exposed in front of upstanding stones [005]	NW
58-63	Close up shots of exposed remains	NW
64-67	Post ex shots of trench	NW
68-70	Post ex shots of trench	NE
71-72	Post ex shots f trench	SE
73-75	Post ex shots of trench	SW
76-78	Close up of remains after removal of stones [005]	NW
79-83	Shots showing rabbit burrowing in proximity to remains location	NW
84-86	Post ex shots of trench immediately prior to backfilling	SW
87-91	Post ex shots of trench and site following backfilling and re-turfing	Various
92-121	Post excavation shots showing condition of site upon departure	Various

Appendix 3 – Drawing Register

Drawing No	Description	Scale
1	Profile of trench from northwest	1:10
2	Plan of trench	1:20

Appendix 4 – Finds Register

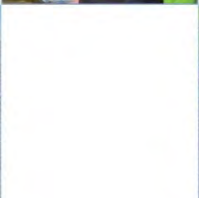
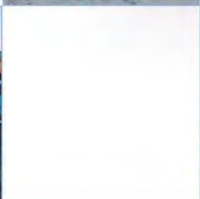
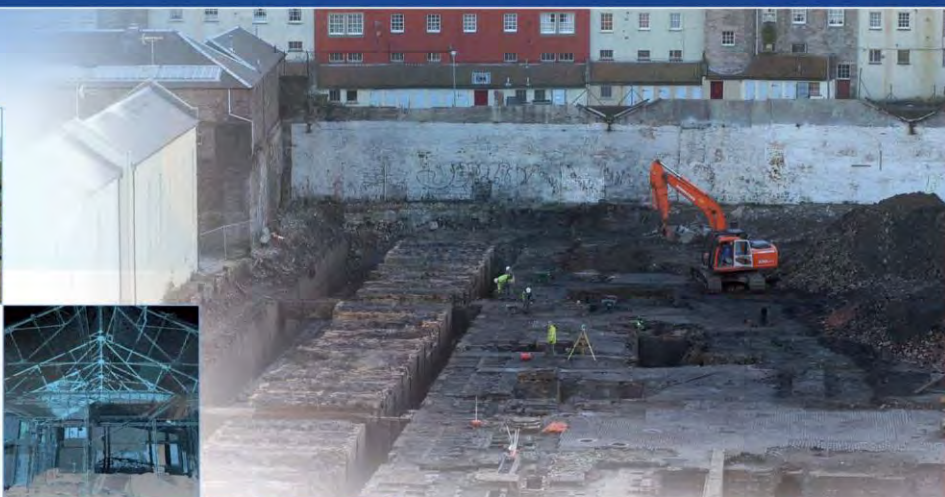
Finds #	Context	Material Code
1	[004]	Bo
2	[004]	Bo

Appendix 5 – Sample Register

Context	Description	Volume
[004]	Deposit taken from around 'bone cluster 1'	10L
[004]	Deposit taken from around 'bone cluster 2'	10L

Appendix 6 - 'Discovery and Excavation in Scotland' Entry

LOCAL AUTHORITY:	Argyll and Bute
PROJECT TITLE/SITE NAME:	Cnoc nan Gall, Colonsay
PROJECT CODE:	23956-8
PARISH:	Colonsay and Oronsay
NAME OF CONTRIBUTOR:	Stuart Wilson
NAME OF ORGANISATION:	AOC Archaeology Group on behalf of Historic Environment Scotland
TYPE(S) OF PROJECT:	Excavation
NMRS NO(S):	n/a
SITE/MONUMENT TYPE(S):	n/a
SIGNIFICANT FINDS:	Human remains
NGR (2 letters, 6 figures)	NR 3587 9341
START DATE (this season)	23/10/2018
END DATE (this season)	26/10/2018
PREVIOUS WORK (inc DES)	GUARD 2010 Excavation 3176
MAIN (NARRATIVE) DESCRIPTION: (May include information from other fields)	<p>AOC acting on behalf of HES were summoned to the Island of Colonsay due to the discovery of an unidentified set of human remains. The remain were located on the burial mound known as Cnoc nan Gall.</p> <p>The remains were comprised two separate sets of disarticulated human remains dispersed from there original deposit due to rabbit burrowing. No further remains were discovered. AOC also completed a topographical survey of the area to record the exact location of the remains and assess the erosion that occurred in the 10 years since the last archaeological works.</p>
PROPOSED FUTURE WORK:	TBC
CAPTION(S) FOR ILLUSTRATIONS:	N/A
SPONSOR OR FUNDING BODY:	Historic Environment Scotland
ADDRESS OF MAIN CONTRIBUTOR:	AOC Archaeology Group, Edgefield Road Industrial Estate, Loanhead, Midlothian, EH20 9SY
EMAIL ADDRESS:	stuart.wilson@aocarchaeology.com
ARCHIVE LOCATION	Archive to be deposited in NMRS



AOC Archaeology Group, Edgefield Industrial Estate, Edgefield Road, Loanhead EH20 9SY
tel: 0131 440 3593 | fax: 0131 440 3422 | e-mail: edinburgh@aocarchaeology.com

www.aocarchaeology.com