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Recent Excavations in the Southern Inner Hebrides

J.N.G. Ritchie, J.B. Stevenson and H.G. Welfare

The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland has been working for some years in Argyll; two Inventory volumes have so far been published, Kintyre (1971) and Lorn (1975) and Northern Argyll with Mull, Coll and Tiree will appear in 1980. Fieldwork on Islay, Jura, Colonsay and Oronsay is now well advanced. Although excavation is not an important part of the Commissions's work, several sites have been examined in recent years, either because their destruction was imminent or because they belonged to classes of monuments which were otherwise well documented (for example hut-circles).

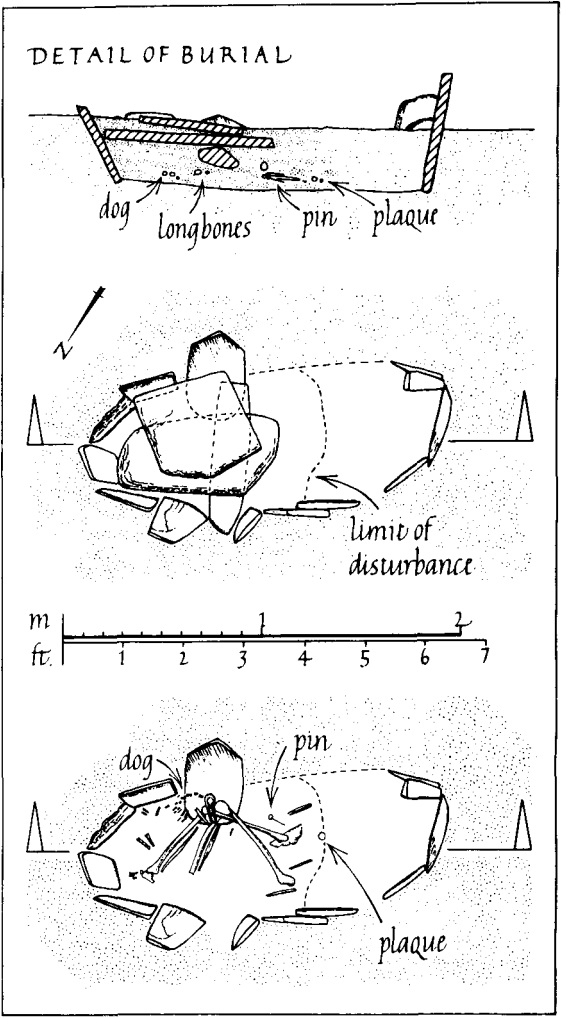
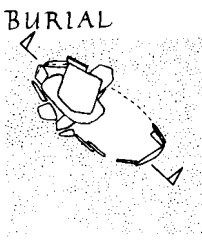
Sand-dune areas have received particular attention as they can reveal traces of occupation which help to indicate the span of settlement on islands where little systematic excavation has taken place in the past. The material from Coll, for example, has been examined in some detail, and a catalogue of the more important small finds from sand-hill sites has been prepared. This survey led to the excavation of what proved to be a fragmentary settlement-site at Sorisdale; the house was comparable to that at Northton, Harris, and was associated with large plain shouldered-vessels like those from Kilellan, on Islay, and Rosinish, on Benbecula. A burial immediately adjacent to the settlement site at Sorisdale was associated with an All-over-cord ornamented beaker; analysis of the bones from the burial resulted in a date of 1934 bc \pm 46 (BM-1413).

At Machrins, on Colonsay, a sand-dune site was found to be of mid-first millennium AD date (Medieval Archaeology 23 (1979), 247); four virtually contiguous houses, discovered as a series of slabs protruding through the machair, had unfortunately been much disturbed by rabbits. They were squarish on plan with rounded corners and measured about 4.2 m across the centre. Tanged iron knives and radiocarbon analysis of material from the overlying midden provide the best indication of the date of the houses. At a point some 14 m from the settlement an upright stone protruding slightly above the turf suggested the presence of a further structure; excavation revealed, however, a partly disturbed long-cist burial. The sand-filled cist, aligned NE and SE, had contained a flexed inhumation; the SW end of the cist, where the upper part of the body had been, was disturbed and little of the skeleton survived. The leg bones were intact, their position indicating that the body had been buried on its side, with its back to the NW side of the grave. At the NE end, a dog had been laid out with its head at the knees of the inhumation. The accompanying grave-goods included a fragment of bronze decorated with what appears to be back-to-back animals (rather in the style of the St Ninian's Isle cones), a pin with a loose ring-head, and an iron nail with the shank hammered over. Radiocarbon analysis of collagen from the long bones of the inhumation produced a date of ad 780 \pm 70 (GU-1114).

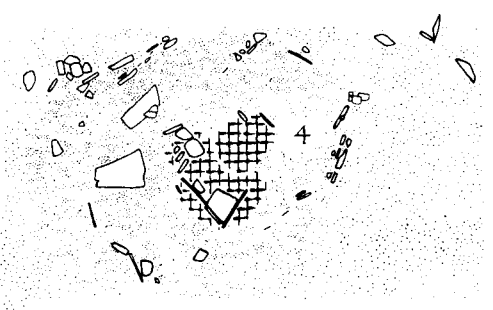
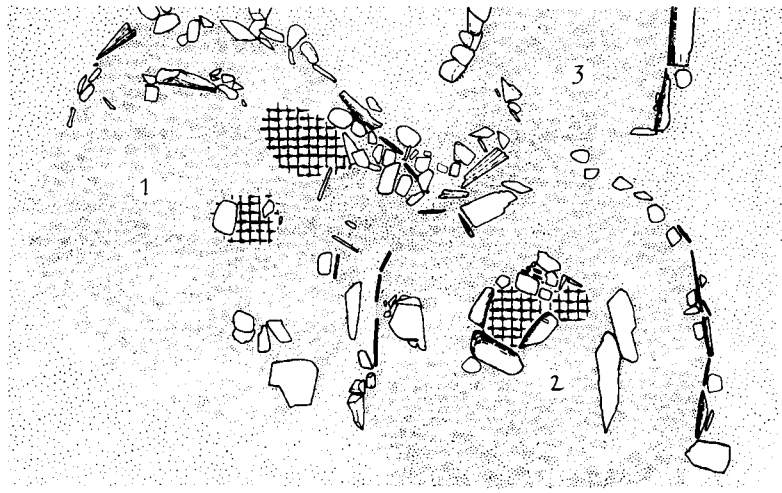
The sand-dunes of Ardnave Point, the north tip of the Rhinns of Islay, cover many settlement- and burial-sites of prehistoric and early historic date, the most important being the complex at Kilellan excavated by Colin Burgess. In March, 1977, erosion of a sand-dune close to the Point uncovered a substantial stone-built hearth. A well-preserved 'rosette' pin of tinned bronze, paralleled in the upper levels of the excavations at Traprain Law (East Lothian), was found on the surface next to the hearth. Limited excavations revealed occupation material associated with the hearth, but no other structural remains. One artefact, a P-shaped brooch, also of tinned bronze was recovered. Both the pin and the brooch probably date to about the third century AD. By 1979 further erosion had exposed a stone structure within the same sand-blow, and excavation revealed that this was an oval house measuring 4 m by 3 m. The entrance was at one end between two upright 'portal-stones' with a short baffle wall in front, an indication perhaps that though the surrounding ground would have been grass-land, sand-blows could be expected. The floor deposits have not yet been examined. Separated from the house by a thick deposit of blown sand there is a complex series of occupation layers including thick midden-deposits containing limpet shells and pottery, including food vessel sherds, showing similarities to the assemblage from Kilellan itself. The house may have been surrounded by a roughly rectangular enclosure-wall, and adjacent to this is an extensive area of cultivation, as yet undated. The excavation will be continued in 1980, and will, it is hoped, complement the work of teams from Newcastle at Kilellan and Ardnave.

On Jura, in contrast to the sand-dune excavations on Islay, Colonsay and Coll, the Commission is currently carrying out excavations on an upland (76 m OD) homestead at Cul a' Bhaile. There, on open moorland, a stone-walled enclosure measuring 78 m by 65 m (c. 0.4 ha) surrounds a single hut-circle (6.5 m in internal diameter), which was reroofed on at least two occasions. The small amount of pottery and flintwork found in and around the hut-circle are not closely datable, but it is likely that the homestead belongs to the early second millennium BC.

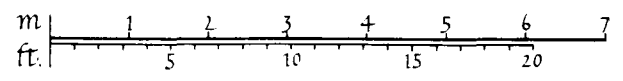
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SETTLEMENT



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Excavations at Ardnave, Islay
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Excavations at Houseledge, Black Law, Northumberland