

## Breaking the Circle: Archaeology and Architecture in the Later Iron Age of Northern Scotland

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### Introduction

The northern mainland of Scotland, and Caithness in particular, was central to early accounts of the broch phenomenon (Laing 1866, Rhind 1853, Anderson 1890, 1901). There was, however, little antiquarian interest in the buildings invariably surrounding excavated brochs. Neither was there a concern with the exploration of the possibilities of Iron Age settlement away from these imposing sites. With the publication of the RCAHMS *Inventories* for Caithness and Sutherland in 1911 (RCAHMS 1911a, 1911b), something of the true variety and character of the archaeology of the two counties became apparent. Ironically, during the earlier years of the present century, archaeological interest in the northern mainland began to wane, and the Northern and Western Isles replaced it as the heartland of Atlantic Iron Age studies. Although there have been a small number of published excavations from Caithness, and northern and eastern Sutherland, in the intervening years (Curle 1941, 1947; Calder 1948; Fairhurst 1984; Love 1989), archaeological interest in the area has chiefly been kept alive by the Ordnance Survey, and latterly by the Royal Commission. Their work has also been enhanced by a number of more specific surveys (Batey 1984; Mercer 1981; 1985; Mercer and Howell 1980; RCAHMS 1993; Morrison 1996). This has resulted in an archaeological resource second to none in the north, especially in the upland areas where survival rates have been particularly high, but which is not matched by an excavation record of comparable quality. This imbalance has been exacerbated by an almost exclusive concentration, during the twentieth century, on the brochs, although more recent work has begun to redress the balance (Fairhurst and Taylor 1971; Barclay 1985; Mercer 1996). At an intra-site level, the view has been similarly myopic over the years. Under the constraints of time and erosion, work has focused on the brochs themselves, at the expense of the complexes of buildings that surround them. We therefore understand little of the history of these sites during the Later Iron Age, when brochs elsewhere seem to have gone out of use while their sites remained in occupation.

There is, however, a group of northern sites, the 'wags', which have often been proposed, albeit tentatively, as a likely Later Iron Age settlement form. Such ideas have been based either on vague structural parallels to firmly dated structures elsewhere, or on the incompletely understood structural sequence from one site in particular, the Wag of Forse, in Latheron parish, Caithness. There has been little detailed research on the 'wags' as a group in recent years. In this paper, I will explore the potential of this group of sites for achieving an understanding of the character of the later Iron Age in the north, and draw out some of the themes suggested by their apparently unique architecture.

### Forse: A unique northern architecture?

The term 'wag' is a local, and presumably ancient one, being a corruption of the Gaelic *uamhag*, meaning 'little cave' or possibly 'grotto'. It probably describes the physical appearance of the sites, at many of which the characteristic sub-rectangular shape and earth-fast, upright stones, capped by megalithic lintels, remain clearly visible (Plate 1). I will refer to these structures here as 'aisled buildings'. The place name element *wag* occurs in the vicinity of these structures at a number of locations in Caithness, such as *Wag Mor* and *Wagmore Rigg*, and in Gaelic form in Sutherland, at two sites known as *Uaigh Bheag*, in Glen Loth. This association, which appears to be an exclusive one, suggests that the place-names refer specifically to the sites. It is a mistaken perception that 'wag' sites are confined to the parish of Latheron, in south-east Caithness. In fact, sites can also be found in Glen Loth, Sutherland, and possibly as far south as Uppat Wood, between Golspie and Brora (Reid *et al.* 1982, 158). Indeed, the characteristic aisled architecture of the 'wags', although not their sub-rectangular form, may be found as far afield as the shores of Loch Eriboll, in north-western Sutherland (Mathieson 1925). As I will argue later, it is also possible that elements of this architecture

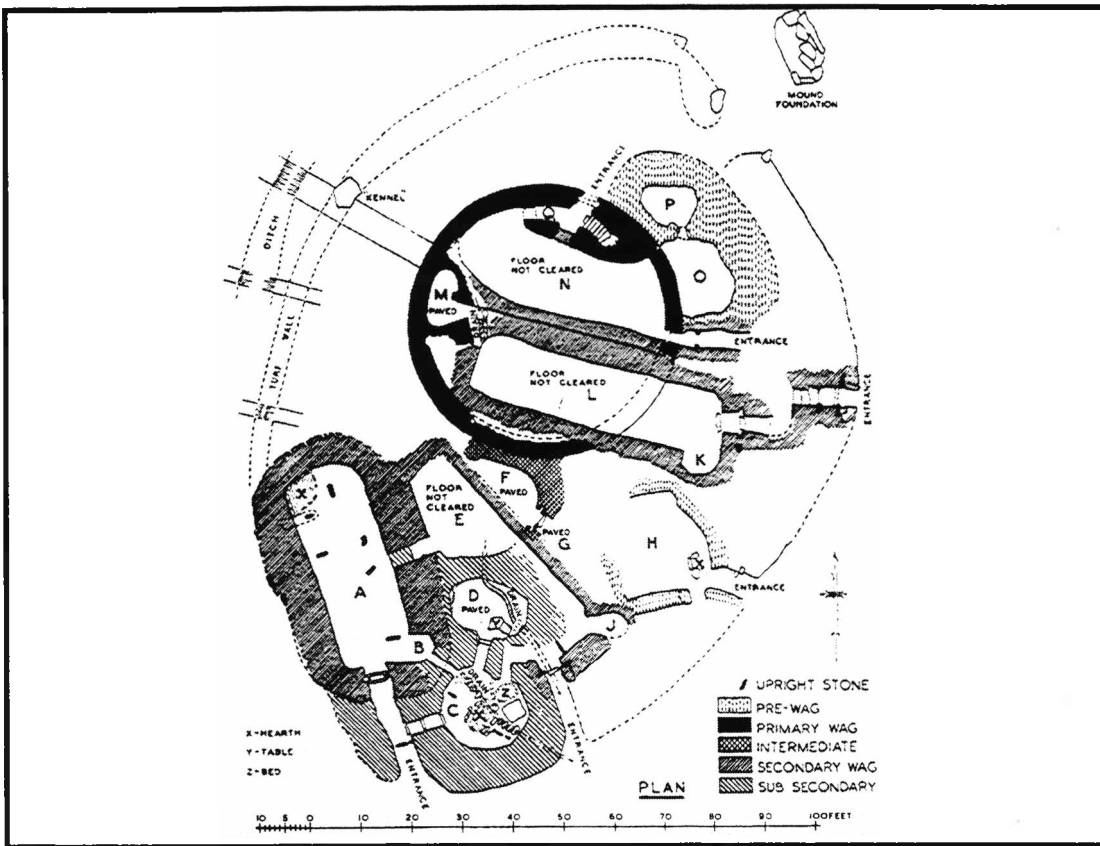


Fig. 1. A.O. Curle's plan of the Wag of Forse (Curle 1947, Fig. 1).

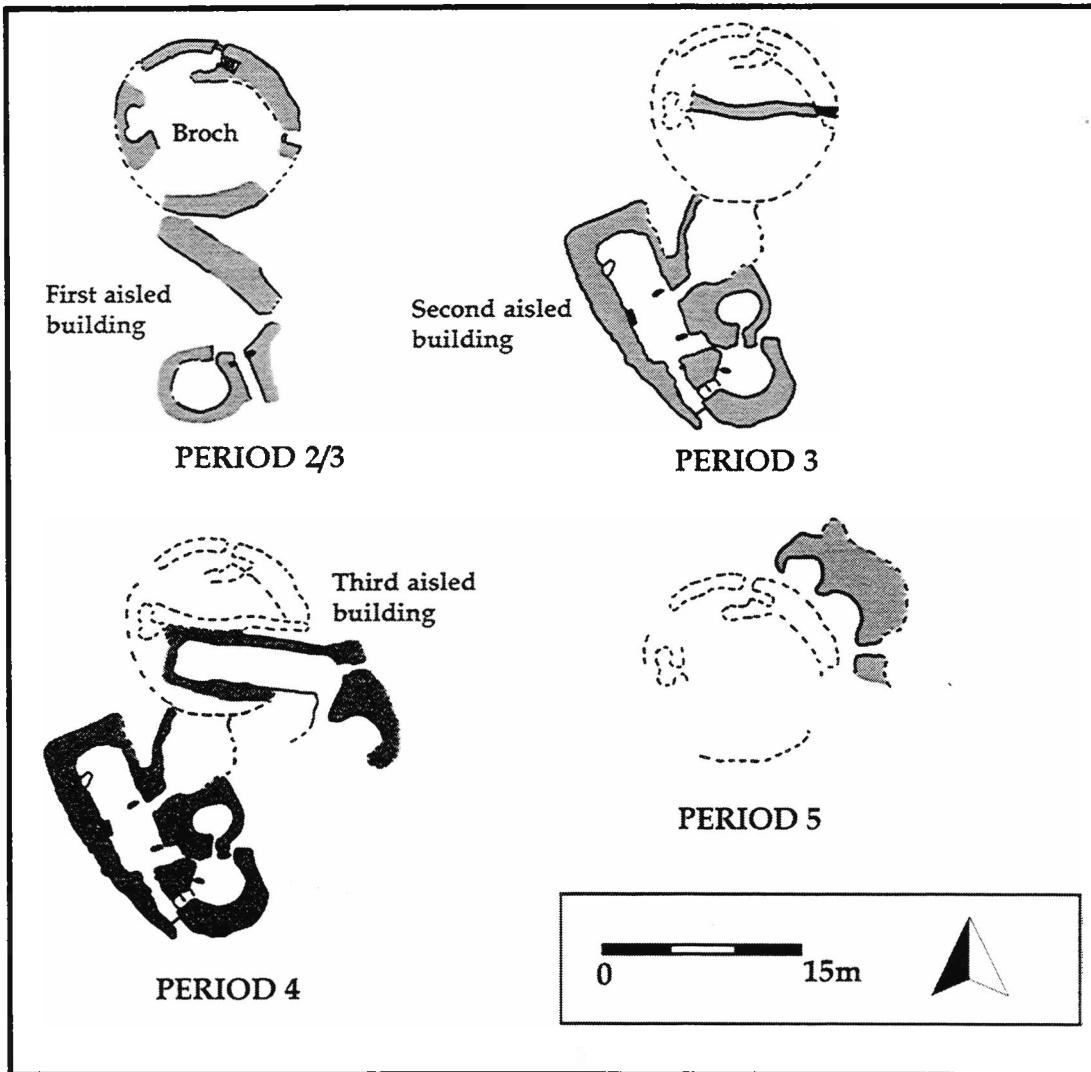


Fig. 2. Suggested structural sequence for the Wag of Forse (after Mercer, unpublished).

may be found on broch sites in north-east Caithness.

Although the sites themselves are likely to have figured in local consciousness since they were in occupation, the 'wags' as an archaeological category derive from the work of A.O. Curle during the early years of the present century. The Caithness *Inventory*, which he compiled, lists a separate class of 'galleried dwellings' in the section devoted to the monuments of Latheron Parish (RCAHMS 1911b, 67). This may be the source of the misapprehension that 'wags' are confined to this parish.

Curle seems to have been drawn to these enigmatic monuments, and proceeded to excavate the site at Langwell, near Berriedale in south-east Caithness (Curle 1912). Although he drew on an earlier excavation, by Joseph Anderson, at the site of Yarrows, Curle's excavations provided what he certainly viewed as a type-site for the 'wags' as a class. This rather limited perception greatly affected the interpretation of his later work at Forse, a far more complex site which he excavated between 1939 and 1948.

Curle's excavations at Langwell and Forse provided little in the way of ostensible dating information, save the clearly Iron Age chronological context in which items such as sections of jet armlet, rotary and saddle quern fragments and everted rim pottery might be set. This apparent indeterminacy has led to the 'wags', being placed in a wide range of later prehistoric and early historic chronological contexts. However, as has recently been more widely recognised (Swanson 1988, 138), this uncertainty rests largely on Curle's failure to recognise that one of the central structural elements of the site is a broch, and that the site can therefore be placed within an existing, if contentious, chronological scheme. Curle's failure to recognise that the massive, circular building he located was a broch might be due to his inflexible interpretation of the site, in terms derived from his excavations at Langwell. This seems to be confirmed by both his narrative discussion, and the plans he used to illustrate it (Fig. 1). These refer to this building as a 'primary wag', despite the fact that it is radically different architecturally to the other sub-rectangular buildings on the site. This misconception has been perpetuated in more recent literature (MacKie 1971, 16). The thin-walled nature of this building is the only aspect of its architecture which militates against its identification as a broch. A detailed examination of the site in the field, in tandem with Curle's field notes, indicates that this is illusory, an artefact of a long history of re-use and modification.

An examination of the site as it exists today, together with a detailed critique of Curle's original field notes and plans, aided by a recent survey of the site by Mercer, suggests the following architectural sequence for the site (Fig. 2):

### Early occupation

The earliest discernible occupation at Forse consists of the fragmentary remains of at least two superimposed sub-circular buildings, one of which was paved and appears to have contained a slab-lined box or cooking trough, suggesting a domestic building.

### Broch phase I

At some time during the Middle Iron Age a broch was constructed on the site. The broch was contained within an outer boundary, and may also have been surrounded by a number of other buildings, although details of these have been obscured by a mass of later structures.

### Broch phase II/Wag phase I

While the broch was still visible as a discrete structure, and remained in use in at least some form, the first of a series of sub-rectangular buildings was constructed to its south, in association with a sub-circular house. This was later overlain by an *aisled* sub-rectangular building, and two more adjoining houses, although the original sub-circular house continued in use. These buildings are likely to have been inserted into existing structural debris, and their form would not have been evident from the surrounding landscape. The broch interior was subdivided by a wall, apparently built from robbed material, indicating that the broch wall may have been reduced in height, and had one of its entrances blocked. Nothing is known of activities carried out within the broch during this phase, and this episode of reconstruction cannot be related chronologically to the construction of the sub-rectangular buildings.

### Wag phase II

A further sub-rectangular building was built into the broch, which is likely to have been visible as a discrete building prior to this phase of construction, although it was replaced by the aisled building at this stage. Again, the character of the latter is unlikely to have been visually evident from outside. The aisled building made use of the same entrance orientation as the broch, suggesting that the gateway through the outer wall in this area remained in use.

### Late Iron Age

A pair of interconnected, sub-circular houses was built against the broch wall. The northern half of the broch interior may have continued in use as an enclosure or yard during this phase of activity.

Although the presence of a broch at Forse represents practically the only way by which the 'wags' as a group might be dated, recent discussions which have labelled these sites 'Pictish' (eg. Ralston and Armit 1997, Fig. 12.3) have not explored the relationship between their sub-rectangular architecture and the circular form of the buildings which appear to have preceded them. This, I would argue, carries the implicit idea that a 'Pictish' architecture will necessarily differ from that conventionally dated, in Foster's (1988) terms to the Middle Iron Age, and that the nature of this difference requires no further interpretative effort. Attempts to define a specifically 'Pictish' settlement archaeology over the past forty-or-so years have met with limited success (eg. Wainwright 1955; Ritchie 1977). It would seem that to continue to abstract structural elements from their contexts holds little hope of demonstrating cultural homogeneity in domestic architecture. Instead, I would argue that we should actively *engage* with the

variation in the settlement archaeology of the Later Iron Age, and attempt to explain this within the context of the localised practices which must have been at the heart of the larger political entities which seem to have come into being during the first millennium AD. Rather than assuming that social changes will find an essential reflection in material culture, we should pursue an interpretative, thematic approach, which attempts to explain how specific material cultures were created and reproduced as part of the context of social life.

The sub-rectangular, aisled buildings at Forse clearly belong to a late phase of activity at the site. However, recent revisions of Atlantic Iron Age chronology, although not universally accepted, suggest that long sequences of occupation around brochs existed throughout the period during which they were being constructed and occupied. As a corollary, late use of a broch site is not necessarily unequivocal evidence of Later Iron Age activity. Before proceeding to a discussion of more general themes in the archaeology of the northern mainland, then, it is first necessary to demonstrate contextually that the aisled buildings at Forse do indeed belong to the Later Iron Age.

At Caithness broch sites, the excavated evidence suggests a continued concern with the re-creation and embellishment of the circular form of the house. Within such a context, the introduction of sub-rectangular buildings represents a radical architecture. The idea that the introduction of sub-rectangular, aisled buildings may also have chronological implications is strengthened by evidence from the Orkney broch site of Howe. Here, a sub-rectangular building with 'stalls' formed from upright slabs placed perpendicular to its walls was constructed during the mid-first millennium AD, and seems to have been the first building in the settlement surrounding the broch to involve the construction of completely new walling (Ballin Smith 1995). It also seems to represent the first clearly definable architectural *form* in an area formerly taken up by rather amorphous, organic structures. Both of these features are analogous to the situation at Forse. It is likely that the introduction of sub-rectangular, aisled buildings at Forse represents a break with a long-lived tradition of circular architecture, which occurred at some point during the Later Iron Age.

Although the record of the artefactual evidence from Forse and Langwell is inadequate, the locations of those objects which were recorded may nonetheless be significant. Of the known finds, almost 70% came from the circular houses and connecting passages. These consisted largely of coarse pottery, together with querns, jet armet fragments, spindle whorls and flint objects. Curle recovered remarkably few objects from the aisled buildings themselves, and those which were found consisted largely of hammerstones and abraded pebbles. He mentions no pottery finds from these buildings at all. Although the circumstances of deposition of these finds were never recorded, and we consequently have no way of choosing between deliberate deposition, chance loss or post-abandonment deposition, they none-the-less suggest differences in use or treatment between the two types of structure. It seems likely that circular houses, with their central hearths, represent the

continuance of circular domestic architecture. The sub-rectangular, aisled buildings, within which no primary hearths were located at either Forse or Langwell, may have encompassed non-domestic practices. These may have included the storage of food, and other produce. It seems likely, then, that the 'wags' represent a new architectural form, where aspects of domestic practice which had formerly been contained in a single building, were divided between separate spaces.

## Themes in the later Iron Age of northern Scotland

The study of the Iron Age in Atlantic Scotland has been characterised by the construction of inflexible structural typologies. This has inhibited the development of wider social themes, and concentrated attention on a series of rather sterile debates over which structures should be included within which category. Bearing this in mind, I do not wish to consider the sequence visible at Forse simply as an exemplar, to which all other Later Iron Age structural sequences in the north should conform. Rather, I would argue that we should adopt an approach to this archaeology which attempts to explain the ways in which broad similarities visible within it may have resulted from specific localised practices. An inclusive approach, which attempts to explore how local variation might relate to wider themes, may be more productive than traditional ideas, which have sought to *exclude* buildings and other items of material culture as a result of their perceived lack of conformity to idealised types.

In the case of the Wag of Forse, there are clear thematic changes in its architecture, which we might seek to identify elsewhere in the Iron Age archaeology of the northern mainland of Scotland. These may be summarised as follows:

1. Throughout the earlier history of use at the site, the predominant domestic architectural form appears to have been circular. A division between the Middle Iron Age to the Later Iron Age may be characterised by a move from a predominantly to a sub-rectangular building tradition.
2. This change seems to represent a move from generalised architecture towards a more compartmentalised use of space, which may have been accompanied by an increasing division between the domestic and non-domestic areas of life.
3. There is likely to have been a parallel change from an external to an internal monumentality.

It should now be possible to attempt a critical examination of the wider settlement architecture of the Later Iron Age in northern Scotland. Although the most obvious group of sites to which these ideas may be relevant is that of the other 'wag' sites in south-eastern Caithness and eastern Sutherland, I wish to begin with the broch sites of north-eastern Caithness, which also seem to share certain common characteristics with Forse. With the possible exception of



*Plate 1. Pillar with in situ capstone, Wag of Forse.*



*Plate 2. Keiss White Gate broch, taken during the excavations, showing the remains of a possible aisled building (centre). Crown copyright - RCAHMS.*

Keiss White Gate broch, structural sequences at other sites in northern and eastern Caithness do not appear to have involved the direct superimposition of sub-rectangular, aisled buildings onto brochs. At the well-known site of Yarrows (Fig. 3), however, a more amorphous group of aisled structures was appended to a broch, apparently during a late phase in its occupation (Swanson 1988, 18). At this site, there appear to have been no separate circular houses associated with the aisled buildings, and it may be that the broch continued in use as a domestic structure at this time. Although Yarrows represents the clearest example of aisled architecture on a northern broch site, possible examples of a similar spatial transformation may also be noted at other sites. Among these is the site of Nybster (Anderson 1901), where a sub-rectangular, aisled building is exposed high in the structural remains. This building differs from the examples at Forse in size, and in the method by which the aisled partitions have been produced; at Nybster flat slabs set on edge were used. Indeed, this building is much more closely analogous in many respects to the Howe example than those at Forse or Yarrows. Nonetheless, it does indicate the presence of a sub-rectangular architecture within the later phases of occupation on a broch site in north-eastern Caithness.

Although similar structures cannot be identified as clearly at other excavated sites in the area, fragmentary rectangular elements exist within the confusion of structures which surround many of them. At Keiss White Gate broch, early excavation photographs show an enigmatic twin alignment of upright stones, together with what appears to be a reduced wall-face, which stretches across the interior of the site (Plate 2). Although this feature is no longer visible, it may have been another example of the construction of a rectangular building over a broch during the Later Iron Age.

While the evidence for Later Iron Age domestic architecture in north-eastern Caithness is somewhat sparse and fragmentary, in the 'wags' further to the south we have a group of sites which are clearly analogous to the structures at Forse (see Cowley, this volume). The known sites are located mainly at the inner ends of the Straths and Glens of south-east Caithness, with another group in Glen Loth, a narrow valley which links the lower part of the Strath of Kildonan with the Moray Firth coast to the south. Whereas the small number of firmly identified aisled buildings in northeastern Caithness are located on broch sites, the southern examples have a radically different landscape context. Aside from the wide, fertile Strath of Kildonan, where sites are evenly distributed (RCAHMS 1993, 9; Cowley this volume), the brochs of the region are concentrated at the outer reaches of the river systems. The distribution stands in direct contrast to that of the 'wag' sites which are almost all located towards the inner ends of the river systems. A.O. Curle originally suggested that this apparent dichotomy in the two distributions could be explained if the 'wags' were interpreted as cattle corrals, outposts where the broch builders might tend their stores of wealth on the hoof (Curle 1947, 23). However, as I have argued above, it is unlikely that aisled buildings coincide with the main period during which the brochs were in use

as domestic dwellings. Furthermore, there are locations, such as at the excavated site of Langwell and at Cor Tulloch, along the Houstry Burn, where 'wag' sites and brochs occur in close proximity, making it unlikely that they represent different landscape locations within the same settlement system. The aisled buildings were invariably placed on the valley floors, often close to the main river, rather than in highly visible positions on terraces high on their sides as in the case of the brochs, and a commanding landscape position seems to have been unimportant.

It is probable that some broch sites in the southern area with evidence of complexes of surrounding buildings may also contain evidence of later Iron Age domestic occupation, although this cannot be demonstrated conclusively on the basis of present evidence. Cowley (this volume) has argued that during the earlier centuries AD circular and sub-rectangular domestic building traditions may have co-existed. As he notes, this phenomenon may be seen within the Dunbeath Water. Indeed, very few of the known aisled buildings lack at least some evidence of an associated circular or sub-circular structure (Fig. 4).

## **Conclusion: Architecture and society in the later Iron Age**

The later Iron Age saw the extension of settlement into the heart of the Straths and Glens. This does not mean that these were empty landscapes. There are hundreds of known 'hut-circle' and 'homestead' sites strung out along the rivers and tributaries of eastern Sutherland and south-eastern Caithness (see Cowley, this volume). Although the few excavated examples have provided dates in the first millennium BC, it is possible that dwellings of this kind continued in use during the period in which the brochs were occupied. Indeed, many such sites, and their associated agricultural traces, may now be overlain by the remains of settlements abandoned more recently.

What set the aisled buildings apart was their monumentality. Although many of the larger hut-circles were of similar dimensions to the brochs (Armit 1997, Figure 11), they have left only ephemeral traces in the landscape, and some may have been occupied for relatively short periods (Halliday, this volume). Furthermore, it is also possible that, at least during the earlier first millennium BC, many of these sites were occupied and re-occupied on a shifting basis, and do not represent the creation of permanent settlements. The brochs, however, were built in stone. They seem always to have been intended as monuments in the literal sense. They seem, from the outset, to have formed a lasting physical and symbolic focus for their communities, around which complex social relationships might be maintained and reproduced. Most excavated examples have shown evidence of long histories of use, reconstruction and embellishment. Barrett and Foster (1991) have argued that such relationships may have been based on 'face-to-face' interaction, within the monumental domestic context provided by the broch.

The presence of the aisled buildings deep within the

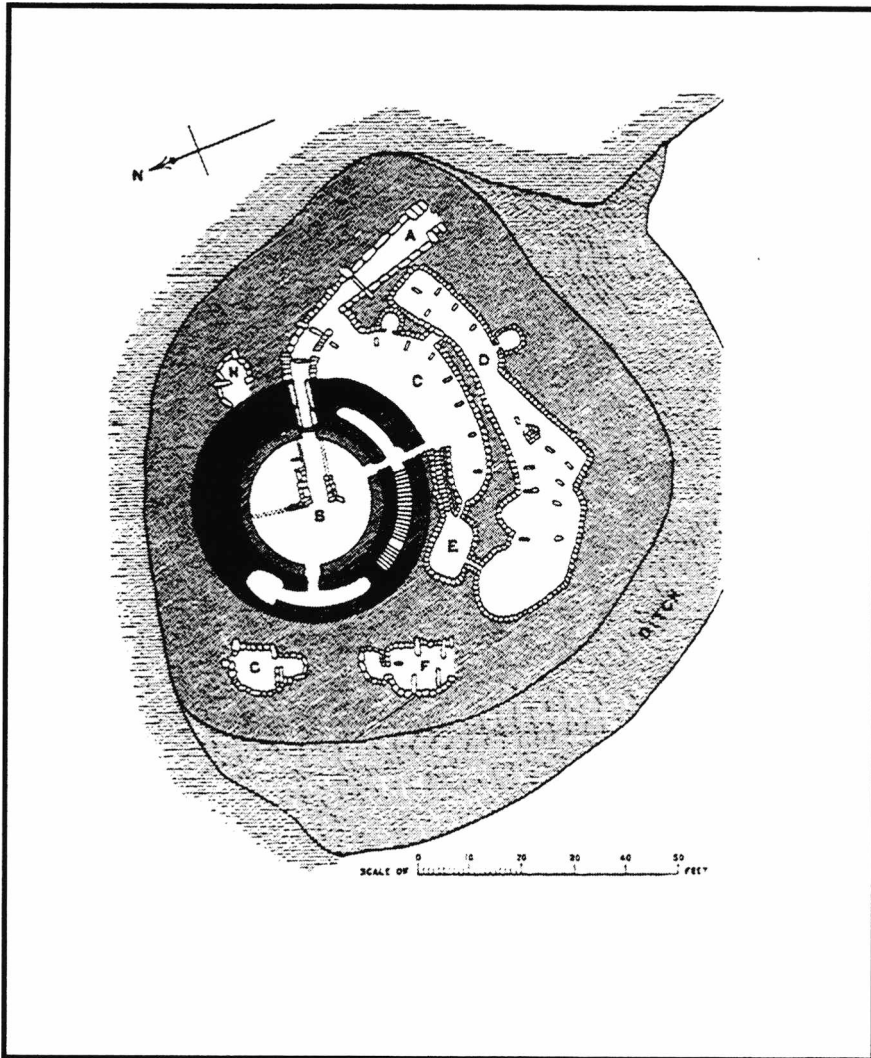


Fig. 3: Plan of Yarrow's broch (Anderson 1890).

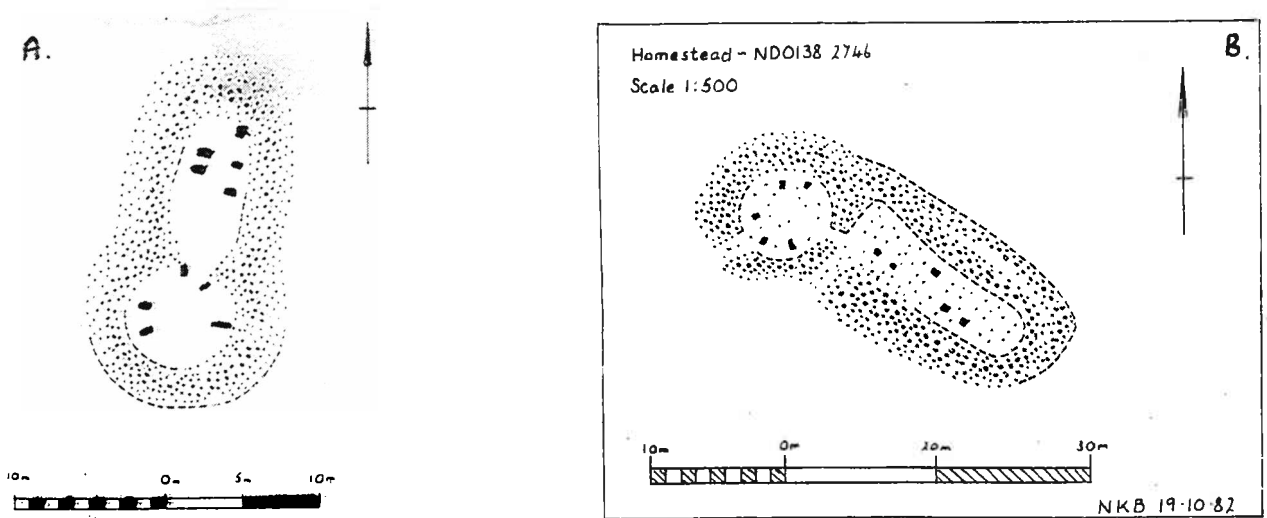


Fig. 4: 'Wag' sites with aisled buildings associated with circular houses; Berriedale Water, Caithness (A), Morven, Caithness (B). Crown copyright - RCAHMS.



straths and glens seems to have involved the re-establishment of a monumental architectural presence, which had declined during the Bronze Age. This new monumentality did not command the same visual presence within the landscape as either the Neolithic and Bronze Age ritual monuments or the broch sites located further downstream. Instead, the emphasis was on the inside. In many ways, this new architecture might be seen as a transformation of that of the brochs. The bays created by the pillars and lintels may be analogous to the radial slab partitions found within many excavated broch sites in the north, which seem to have allowed the division of activities taking place within their peripheral spaces (Reid 1989). In the case of the aisled buildings, these sub-divisions were arranged linearly, and introduced the possibility of ranking the materials which may have been stored within. This use of space contrasts markedly with that of the houses which accompanied the aisled buildings, which retained their circular form, and presumably their domestic focus on a central hearth.

This internal monumentality may also have implications in relation to the transformation of wider social landscapes. Their lack of external visual impact suggests that these sites did not function in the reproduction of society on a daily, face-to-face basis, continually reinforcing the relationships between those who lived around them. Rather, it is likely that they were only drawn upon within a restricted and specific range of practices, perhaps related to the gathering, storage and ordering of agricultural produce, and that rights of access to land and resources may have been negotiated elsewhere. The location of 'wag' sites at the inner ends of the valley systems, often to either side of the passes which connected them, suggests that they formed a part of landscapes which incorporated patterns of movement. This may have contrasted with an earlier situation, where broch sites seem to have been the focus of more static landscapes, based on social relationships at a very local level. Barrett and Foster (1991) have suggested that the later Iron Age may have been characterised by the emergence of more extensive, long-distance social relationships, eventually leading to the establishment of wider political entities during the first millennium AD. These large-scale social changes may have been partly negotiated through the changing domestic architecture which has been the subject of this paper.

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