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## Chapter 6

# Rooted in water: the Scottish island-dwelling tradition

Robert Lenfert

The human affinity for living along the margins of watery places – seas, rivers, lakes and wetlands – can be regarded as a near-universal trait with a long pedigree. This bold statement is hardly a revelation, as water sustains human life – along with countless other organisms upon which our lives depend. It is therefore not surprising that the abundant freshwater lochs located throughout much of Scotland served as focal points for human activity throughout the ages, whether for survival or security, serenity or status. Yet rather than being content simply to live *near* watery places, many former inhabitants of Scotland chose to live *on* the water. This tradition is readily visible through the remains of over 500 artificial or modified natural islets whose collective chronologies span a period of over five millennia. Neighbouring Ireland also contains numerous occupied islets of a slightly later nature whose main floruit of use appears to be during the Early Christian Period, though recent fieldwork is steadily rolling back this horizon (O’Sullivan 2009), while one crannog is currently known to exist in Wales at Llangorse lake; reputedly the legacy of an Irish settler in the ninth century AD (Redknap *et al.* 1999, 377).

Briefly, there are a few caveats to digest. Today, Scottish island dwellings are most commonly known by just one of their various medieval monikers as *crannogs*, while numerous terminologies for island dwellings in all their various guises exist – an issue which has muddied the classificatory waters in Scotland (Henderson 1998, 235–40, Harding 2000, 301, Lenfert 2011, 4–6, 2012, 47–71, 2013, 125–7). This has inadvertently led to a divide between the study of Hebridean and mainland crannog use – effectively a singular concept typically expressed primarily in stone rather than timber. In this regard, the analysis of islet use in Scotland is often a contradictory affair. There are few wholesale observations which can be

applied to the overall tradition beyond the shared concept of living on a small islet, while conversely, variation abounds.

Context is often key with crannog discussions. I believe a biography of island dwellings in Scotland is particularly well-suited for discussions on memory and reuse, and therefore *not* particularly well-suited for highly focussed discussions on specific periods. In doing so, one risks losing sight of an inherent part of this rich tradition, namely longevity and persistence. In this sense, a narrative of Iron Age islet use plays an integral role within a Medieval or Post-Medieval narrative, one which sees the much later reoccupation of prehistoric islets which reproduces the same concept – living on water. This underlying theme of reuse and reoccupation provides fertile soil for a number of discussions, not all of which can be addressed in the available space, but alluded to below. These topics include the formation and creation of memory through oral or invented traditions, threads of continuity and change, what monumentality is or is not, and finally, the transposition or projection of legitimacy through the occupation of ancient places.

### Presence in the landscape

Current research indicates there are some 571 known or suspected examples of occupied islets in Scotland, ranging from Shetland in the north to Dumfries and Galloway in the south (Lenfert 2012). The majority – at least 347 – are believed to be primarily artificial, i.e. crannogs. Crannogs were laboriously constructed in a number of ways, usually by simply creating a robust mound of stones on shallow loch shelves to form a small island – a technique primarily seen in northern Scotland and the Hebrides, or alternatively, by driving a ring of timber piles into a suitably shallow area of loch bed and filling the interior with peat, brush

or stone, until an islet large enough to provide structural support emerged – a technique most commonly witnessed in more northeastern and southern areas of Scotland (Henderson 1998, 231).

Therefore, in a very real sense, crannogs are a direct reflection of their immediate environment *at the time of construction*, which relied upon readily available materials in the surrounding environment. As a result, these artificial islets range in composition from nascent examples of Neolithic Hebridean crannogs, a current rarity in the archaeological record (Lenfert 2013, 129), to peat-covered mounds of stone built after the wind-swept Western Isles became largely treeless, a lengthy event which began in the Mesolithic and culminated around the late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age transition (Tipping 1994, 23, Fossitt 1996, 171). On the Scottish mainland, the construction of crannogs also mirrors their environment, typically comprising dense agglomerations of timber and brush, rich in organic materials, in those areas which retained sufficient timber resources.

Today, mainland crannogs are deceptive in their appearance – generally nothing more than small, heavily vegetated islets in the picturesque lochs of Scotland, which typically garner little attention from tourists, boaters or fishermen. Underwater inspection in cold, low visibility conditions is often necessary to confirm their artificial nature, which is typically confirmed by the presence of worked timber piles or a tell-tale foundation of irregular boulders small enough to be deposited by human action, while the occasional drought or loch drainage scheme has allowed for sporadic chance identifications without the need for diving. However, it is quite a different story in the Western Isles where prominent drystone architecture visually dominates the archaeological record, alerting us to past activity on islets through a number of intricate and certainly monumental forms: Atlantic roundhouses, including brochs, duns and cellular structures such as wheelhouses, and later, robust, rectilinear Medieval structures.

Access to island dwellings is archaeologically visible through the remains of stone, and less frequently, timber causeways, or the presence of logboats. As recent fieldwork by the author demonstrates, numerous island dwellings are situated in waters shallow enough to provide direct access by simply wading, a habit made easier by simply lifting the traditional highland dress – the belted plaid (not the kilt), commonly worn throughout much of Scotland until at least the early eighteenth century. Conversely, a number of later island dwellings are situated far from shore in deeper water – necessitating the use of boats for access. Overall, this legacy of islet use in Scotland

has arguably manifested itself as one of the longest-surviving and most unique settlement traditions in European history.

### A 'wide-angle view' of islet use in Scotland

From an archaeological perspective, one of the most immediately recognizable characteristics of island dwellings is their extensive, if not unrivalled, chronology. Scottish crannogs were variously constructed, renewed or reoccupied over some five and a half millennia, from the Neolithic to as late as the eighteenth century, yet this scenario is certainly not one of complete continuity, at least in the current archaeological record. Scottish island dwellings made a Neolithic debut in the Western Isles of Scotland at sites such as the crannog of Eilean Dòmhnuille (Armit 2003), the natural or modified islet of Eilean an Tighe (Scott 1950) and the apparent Neolithic stone and timber crannog at Loch Àirigh na Lic (Dixon & Topping 1986, 191) during a period when static settlement forms and agriculture became widely established. Given the limited depth of fieldwork carried out thus far on Hebridean islet sites, it is almost certain that additional Neolithic crannogs exist here – an area the author intends to revisit in the near future. In contrast, this poorly understood but apparent Neolithic appearance was followed by an extended hiatus in islet use during the Bronze Age, with the sole exception of limited islet occupation in Argyll at the beginning of the first millennium BC (Rennie & Newall 2001). Here, Melldaloch Island exists as a large natural island, and thus stands out as something of an anomaly in both chronology and setting. While future findings will no doubt alter this early chronology, in reality there are currently over 200 radiocarbon or tree-ring dates available from Scottish island dwellings (Lenfert 2012, 18–19). With this amount of data now available, the stark absence of Bronze Age activity during all but the very end of the Late Bronze Age suggests islets during this period were simply not occupied on an appreciable scale.

It is on the periphery of the Early Iron Age (c. 800–700 BC) that island dwellings are first constructed on an appreciable scale in Scotland, making the leap in both time and space from the Western Isles. By the mid- to late first millennium BC, crannog use reached a floruit, appearing across much of Western Scotland, and to a lesser extent, eastern areas linked by water routes. These later prehistoric sites appear in the archaeological record as largely unassuming homesteads – it is their unique location that holds an air of monumentality, rather than the limited material assemblages which speak more of domesticity than defence, though concerns of ritual matters appear to

have been present as well (below). The island dwelling tradition was largely unaffected by the limited Roman presence, particularly in areas of direct contact such as Dumfries and Galloway. It persists throughout much of the first millennium AD, after which it all but vanishes in the current archaeological record during the Norse Period (c. AD 800–1266), only to re-emerge yet again during the Medieval and Post-Medieval Periods, as a form of settlement increasingly associated with royalty, clansmen and tacksmen. This later use of islets is witnessed by a growing number of written references in the form of charters, official documents and first-hand accounts which tantalizingly allude in the briefest of entries to island dwellings as the setting for feasts, weddings, conflicts and truces – perhaps masking the presence of more commonplace island occupants at this time.

At the end of this saga, the island dwelling tradition ultimately witnessed a rapid demise in the mid- to late seventeenth century. This decline was brought on by a combination of factors, most notably an increasingly centralized government which was effective in dismantling what it accurately saw as an unruly, independent and troublesome clan system. In turn, these efforts toppled long-standing social hierarchies (Shelley 2009, 204), which indirectly led to ideological changes amongst younger members of the land-holding or ruling classes. Newer generations were more likely to be educated in England or on the Continent, or at least exposed to these cultural norms, and domestic desires turned towards constructing tower houses, or later, stately homes with large formal gardens, rather than artificial islands upon which to make their mark. Though the situation in Scotland was far from politically stable – the Jacobites loomed large upon the scene and the Risings of 1715 and 1745 were yet to come, later seventeenth-century life had taken on a considerably more settled tone with reduced internecine violence and raiding that often typified earlier eras. By this point in time, living on an islet went from being a widely accepted practice, which had successfully resisted countless centuries of change, to becoming what basically amounted to an antiquated oddity. The frequently harsh and rugged, yet easily romanticized notion of islet life – one spent hunting and fishing, feasting and heroically defending ancient lineages and traditions, it seems, had gradually given way to afternoon tea.

### Living on water – revisited

Given the sweeping timescale for the construction and occupation of island dwellings, in addition to their sheer numbers, it is reasonable to assume at

least a certain percentage would see phases of reuse after their initial construction and occupation phase. In reality, this concept is more canonical than exceptional. Currently, with the only clear exception of the Post-Medieval site of Eadarloch (Ritchie 1942; Crone 2011, 36), *every* island dwelling excavated to date typically indicates one or more of the following characteristics: extensive periods of largely uninterrupted occupation, multiple occupation phases, or a sudden revitalization and reoccupation, often centuries after initial construction. Why does this reuse appear so systemic throughout the island dwelling tradition? Is it merely related to the opportunistic renewal of an already-existing site, or does memory and ancestry – however real or constructed – contribute to the decisions made by subsequent arrivals? Perhaps, above all, it typifies what has been referred to as ‘the deliberate re-activation of an antique site’ (O’Sullivan & Van De Noort 2007, 71).

### Deconstructing defence

This question of ‘why choose to live on an islet?’ rightly forms one of the most fundamental topics within island dwelling studies. As with most debates in archaeology, the reality is that there are multiple, equally valid explanations for living on water. Defence is the most obvious and most commonly touted motive – a pragmatic, plausible notion which leads back to views held by early antiquarian investigators such as Stuart (1865) and Munro (1882). While any islet has inherently defensive characteristics by virtue of being surrounded by water, there are several factors which weaken this argument as the sole reason to build an island.

First, and perhaps most telling, artificial islands were often constructed in lochs where natural islands already existed, yet these ‘ready-made’ and therefore easily annexed islands often show no archaeological indications of use. This intriguing juxtaposition between unoccupied natural and artificial islets can be seen at Loch Lomond, for instance, where five crannogs were built near natural islands which lacked evidence of human activity (Baker & Dixon 1998, 23). Far from an isolated case, numerous examples of artificial islets built next to natural islets are also found in the Lake of Menteith (Henderson 1998), Loch Awe, Loch Garry and Loch Lundie (Blundell 1909), to name but a few examples. If defence was the overriding issue, using natural islets would free up labour and materials for the construction of robust defensive structures such as palisades, rather than diverting efforts towards the inherently painstaking task of building an island. Second, as fieldwork in the Western Isles has shown (Lenfert 2012, 253–8), it is frequently easier to wade out





**Figure 6.1.** *Author standing on submerged causeway leading to Dun Ban, Grimsay. Causeways are present on many Hebridean crannog sites in particular, yet access is often problematic despite their presence (photo: Nataliya Danilova).*

to many islets, rather than having to rely solely upon unstable, algae-covered causeways or boats for access. In fact, several islet sites inspected during this research are located in water less than 50 cm deep, while in contrast, navigating stone causeways was considerably more time-consuming, and indeed treacherous, that simply wading to islets through shallow water, though local knowledge of loch depth certainly plays a key role in this observation (Fig. 6.1).

Third, far from being secluded enclaves, island dwellings are highly conspicuous in their environment, often visible for a considerable distance. This attribute implies more about making one's presence known, rather than concealing it. Fourth, there is no clear archaeological evidence for violence on any appreciable scale taking place on Scottish crannogs until the later Medieval Period – it should be noted there are exceptions to this in Ireland, however, which appear to relate more to early Norse forays (O'Sullivan 2000). Fifth, and perhaps ironically, island dwellings are particularly vulnerable to any form of siege for the exact same reasons that underline any apparent defensive characteristics. As historical accounts indicate, there are several ways to make life unbearable

for islet occupants, ranging from simply waiting for the besieged occupants to deplete their limited stores of supplies, to more Machiavellian measures such as flooding islets by blocking loch outlets or equally dramatic examples of Post-Medieval cannonades from the foreshore – again in Ireland (O'Sullivan 2000, 41). Finally, protection of food stores from scavengers is another motive which overshadows a potential defensive motive. This holds particularly true in the context of prehistoric societies, at a time when now extinct predators such as lynx, bear and especially wolves would have been encountered with some frequency (Yalden 1999, 111; Lenfert 2012, 561). Finally, food stores on a crannog would be much easier to protect from rodent infestation – a more timeless threat which would have plagued both Neolithic and Medieval occupants alike.

#### **Crannogs, prehistoric belief systems: ceramic and metalwork deposition**

If we look beyond overtly physical virtues, towards early spiritual concerns or belief systems, we see additional motives for the prehistoric occupation of



**Figure 6.2.** Notable examples of largely intact prehistoric pottery recovered by the author from the lochbed surrounding Hebridean crannogs. Though absent from most mainland sites, typological ceramic forms in the Hebrides can help identify phases of occupation where no other chronological evidence exists.

islets which extend beyond the realm of the pragmatic. Based upon notable finds by the author of largely intact prehistoric vessels (Fig. 6.2) deposited around the submerged margins of crannogs in the Hebrides (Lenfert 2011, 17, 22–4, Lenfert *forthcoming*), evidence of intentional ceramic deposition on the loch bed adjacent to crannogs is now apparent in the island dwelling record, as these vessels appear to have been carefully placed upright or in one instance, (Lenfert 2011, 24) nested inside one another, rather than simply discarded into the loch.

In addition, extensive metalwork deposition, well-known in numerous prehistoric European contexts, further alludes to the belief that watery places held a specific significance in prehistory, perhaps later transposed upon themes in early Christianity. These Pagan belief systems deified natural elements, many strands of which were later adopted by Roman incomers. Rivers, lakes, pools and wells have long been associated with not only the essence of life or sources of healing, but also the otherworld (*cf* Green 1995), though much of this evidence is largely anecdotal in nature, primarily surviving through mention in either Greek or Roman sources. In this sense, a reverence for watery places, e.g.

Scottish lochs, raises the strong possibility of a ritual association with the construction and occupation of artificial islands, as opposed to solely natural islet use, as places *intentionally* surrounded by life-giving water, protected and blessed by virtue of their location and detachment from their earthly surroundings.

Furthermore, there exists a similar dynamic for the curious appearance of a number of well-preserved ards deposited in the sub-flooring on crannogs such as Milton Loch (Piggott 1953), Buiston (Munro 1882; Crone 2000), Oakbank (Dixon 2004) and Cults Loch (Cavers 2010). In this vein, it is therefore rather surprising that ritual metalwork deposition is not found in more secure association with island dwellings, although this may simply reflect a lack of excavation on the surrounding lochbed. Sites such as the ‘Iochdar Complex’, in the Western Isles (Lenfert 2012, 490), Dowalton Loch in the southwest and perhaps most importantly, Duddingston Loch (Stuart 1865) have produced evidence of metalwork deposition in association to known or suspected crannogs, yet in many cases, it is difficult to make a convincing correlation due to either the lack of provenance from antiquarian relict hunters or evidence for continuity between site occupation and



artefact deposition. Most crannog excavations have understandably focused upon the islets themselves, not systematic searches of the surrounding lochbed for submerged artefacts. The strongest evidence for metalwork deposition in relation to crannogs comes from neighbouring Ireland. An amnesty for archaeological relics in Ireland was called during the late 1980s. Underwater metal detectorists, in particular, revealed a large number of metal objects deposited near crannogs (O'Sullivan 1998, 42), further strengthening arguments for a correlation between crannogs and deposition associated with ritual activity.

### Island dwellings and the concept of monumentality

Thus far, while defence (from both humans and animals) and ritual concerns appear to provide *partial* explanations for the prehistoric occupation of islets, several other factors play into this discussion, namely

monumentality. This theme holds particularly true in regards to Hebridean islet use, characterized by the presence of imposing Atlantic roundhouses represented by sites such as Dun an Sticer, Dun Cromore, Dun Torcuill and Dun Nighean Righ Lochlainn (Fig. 6.3), to name but a few of the better-known examples (cf Beveridge 1911; Armit 1996; Lenfert 2012) In this sense, most archaeologists would agree monumental architecture is typified by large man-made stone structures such as Scottish brochs or Sardinian *Nuraghi*, or earthworks such as Silbury Hill in England or Monk's Mound in North America. Therefore, it is reasonable to ask what outwardly monumental characteristics crannogs possess. Despite the technical skill and sheer labour associated with their construction, little evidence of the toil necessary to build them is readily apparent to outsiders who might rightly assume the island is not simply natural. Furthermore, within perhaps a decade of abandonment, vegetation would likely obscure any remaining walling present,



**Figure 6.3.** Examples of prominent 'monumental' islet architecture: (clockwise, from upper left) Dun Cromore, Lewis, Dun Nighean Righ Lochlainn and Dun Torcuill, North Uist.

providing the impression simply of a natural islet without visual clues as to its human past.

The answers to this lie more within contemporary site use, in the context of outward visibility and initial impressions upon neighbouring social groups. The ability to construct an island represents the creation of a lasting, highly visible feature in the landscape – one that is not readily discounted. Archaeological evidence from prehistoric crannogs (cf Munro 1882; Piggott 1953; Crone 2000; Dixon 2004) may lack much to associate them artefactually with royalty or high-status lifestyles, yet the available picture is one of often intense activity: a timber causeway leading to a thriving, smoky roundhouse set upon the water, perhaps with a log-boat moored alongside. There would have been the sights and sounds of families carrying out daily tasks, the grinding of grain on a quernstone, or the working of timbers accompanied by the smells of cooking, the butchering of livestock and the processing of animal hides. Infrequent visitors to a particular loch (perhaps during seasonal pastoral movements) would likely be left with quite an impression upon discovering that not only was there a new island in the loch, but that it now contained a bustling household. Experimental archaeology also plays a direct role in forming these perceptions.

Based upon the imagery above, crannogs would therefore possess monumental aspects on several levels: most directly, during the active life-cycle of the site, and less tangibly, after abandonment, as the focal point or setting for events subsumed into local memory. At this junction, oral traditions would become the primary channel through which the knowledge of past events and places on these enigmatic sites were transmitted down to successive generations. Meanwhile, the occasional or accidental recognition of ‘forgotten’ artificial islets through processes such as drought or the discovery of artefacts adds a new variable to sites which became ‘lost’ in local knowledge – including modified or invented histories to explain these peculiar places in the landscape.

### **Island dwelling use and reuse in the archaeological record**

Below are several cases of reuse or lengthy occupation in the island dwelling record which provide insights into the differing patterns of reuse visible in the archaeological record. These traits include: intermittent use or long occupation spans, Medieval or Post-Medieval reoccupation of prehistoric islets and lastly, symbolism associated with the later use of crannogs as political centres of control. The methodology of dating islets in a Scottish context deserves some discussion here. First, the taphonomy of islet sites is particularly

challenging due to variations in loch levels, currents, wind and biological factors, not to mention subsidence of mound structures from any number of causes, most commonly unstable foundations. Attempting to date island dwellings by association based upon visual clues can be deceptive. A clear example is seen at Loch Tay, Perthshire, where two crannogs exist within c. 50 m of one another – Dall Farm North (still above the waterline) and Dall Farm South (completely submerged). Despite being submerged, and thus of greater *apparent* antiquity, Dall South instead returned an Early Historic radiocarbon date in contrast to a considerably older, Mid-Iron Age determination for the still-exposed Dall North site (Dixon 2005, 259). Thus, we see that assumptions regarding site-formation processes relative to adjacent sites cannot be relied upon for relative or sequential dating purposes.

From an artefactual standpoint, it has been noted that the material culture of Scotland is largely homogenous throughout much of later prehistory (Henderson 2007, 171), making it difficult in some instances to date assemblages even broadly based on typologies alone. In addition, the material culture associated with mainland crannogs is largely undiagnostic and virtually aceramic until the mid-first millennium AD. Beyond Neolithic or later Hebridean islet use almost all prehistoric vessels and containers recovered from crannogs are crafted from wood, not ceramics. Again, islet sites in the Hebrides and Northern Isles stand out here as the primary exceptions – places which contain a visible ceramic tradition throughout later prehistory. Therefore, in mainland areas radiocarbon determinations, and to a lesser extent, dendrochronology, play a particularly vital role in chronological discussions of islet use and reuse, rather than reliable typological dating of artefacts.

### **Loch Olabhat, North Uist, Western Isles**

Perhaps the most persistent example of artificial islet use occurs at the Neolithic site of Eilean Domhnuill in Loch Olabhat, North Uist. As with most sites on North Uist, it was first investigated by the keen antiquarian Erskine Beveridge, who noted the presence of several rectangular structures overlying earlier midden ash and quantities of patterned pottery (Beveridge 1911, 198). Little else transpired until the site was re-excavated by Ian Armit in the late 1980s who initially believed the site to be another example of Medieval use based upon the rectilinear foundations (Armit 1987; 1988; 1992a; 1996; 2003). However, excavation revealed at least three successive Neolithic drystone houses whose foundations were largely contiguous and measured some 6 × 4 m internally (Armit 2003, 94). Underwater



trial trenches revealed earlier strata which pre-date the structures, and it is surmised that a rapid sequence of flooding and rebuilding took place during the first of the substantial occupation phases represented at the site (Armit 2003, 95).

The site appears to have witnessed a troubled history, perhaps a testimony to the dogged nature of the occupants who repeatedly returned here. Over multiple cycles, the islet appears to have been completely flooded, abandoned, and then – as it re-emerged from the waters – was rebuilt and occupied yet once more. In comparison to mainland Iron Age crannog assemblages, the Neolithic material culture from the site was prolific. Some 20,000 sherds of Unstan and Hebridean ware were recovered, along with carved stone balls, pumice fishing net floats and numerous saddle querns, while anaerobic conditions provided well-preserved organic layers, including evidence of wattle screens and faunal remains associated with food consumption. However, the notion of the islet as a ‘typical’ domestic site is challenged by Armit, who cites a lack of evidence for the working of materials or the keeping of livestock (e.g. no dung) on the site, along with the fact it was fastidiously maintained from c. 3650–2600 BC despite episodic flooding events. As Armit relates, ‘Whatever else the site was, Eilean Domhnuill was important and permanent’ (Armit 2003, 98).

However, the story of islet use in Loch Olabhat does not end here. The site of Eilean Olabhat, only 200 m east of Eilean Domhnuill within the same loch, was also excavated by Armit and produced dates ranging from the mid-first millennium BC to the onset of the Norse Period, with even later evidence for late Medieval or Post-Medieval reuse (Armit 1989, 35; Armit *et al.* 2008). This former islet is now connected to the foreshore because of changing loch levels and the encroachment of blanket peats. It is considerably larger (c. 60 × 80 m) than its artificial neighbour Eilean Domhnuill (c. 23 m diameter) and is of natural origins although heavily modified with perimeter walling. The earliest construction phase is represented by a small circular stone structure measuring 4 × 5 m internally (Armit *et al.* 2008, 32), followed by three more archaeologically discernible phases of use, occurring not as continuous occupation but as largely discreet episodes. The first and second phases in the second half of the first millennium BC, and perhaps early centuries AD, appeared to have been episodic, not continual. A third phase is evident after a lengthy abandonment in the mid-first millennium AD, marked initially by a domestic occupation phase, followed by the emergence of considerable metalworking activity on-site until perhaps the eighth century AD (Armit *et al.* 2008, 45). The evidence for metalworking from

phase three in the Early Historic Period is notable; 86 mould fragments were recovered while traces of silver were recorded in five crucible fragments (Armit *et al.* 2008, 83). Finally, phase four occurs after yet another lengthy period of abandonment, as a final discrete phase ending somewhere between the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries AD.

### Dun an Sticer, North Uist, Western Isles

Another prehistoric islet which was later reoccupied in the Medieval and Post-Medieval Period is Dun an Sticer (Fig. 6.4), a prominent prehistoric Atlantic roundhouse situated on a natural islet on North Uist in the Western Isles. This popular site amongst tourists today is notable by the insertion of a Medieval rectangular interior within the modified broch shell (Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland 1928, 51). Dun an Sticer retains some of its associated oral tradition, unlike the majority of other islet sites. The Post-Medieval occupant, Hugh, son of Archibald ‘the Clerk’, utilized Dun an Sticer as a base from which he set out to murder the Chief of the MacDonalds and thereby assert control over North Uist during a period of inter-clan unrest after the murder of his father (Beveridge 1911, 140). This would-be usurper on North Uist reputedly held out for nearly a year on this prehistoric broch, until he was reputedly betrayed by his mother attempting to flee by swimming away. His capture, imprisonment in Duntulm Castle on Skye and gruesome death by being given only salted meat and no water, mark an end to this episode (Beveridge 1911, 138; Miers 2008, 5). It is difficult to imagine the unfortunate Hugh chose Dun an Sticer to make his ill-fated bid without considering the historical implications of political power associated with this islet. While this example is one of the more vivid legacies, the overall theme of reoccupying abandoned sites with an associated genealogical or mythological legacy (Gosden & Lock 1998, 2) is archaeologically visible throughout much of the Medieval period, though perhaps lacking the striking narrative associated with Dun an Sticer. It is plausible that throughout Scotland, multiple instances of islet reoccupation were key components towards asserting or contesting claims of ownership or control over the surrounding landscape.

### Eilean na Comhairle, Islay: a prehistoric crannog fit for a medieval king

Loch Finlaggan, located on Islay in the Inner Hebridean archipelago, contains several islets which arguably play an under-recognized role in the history of Medieval Scotland. Loch Finlaggan is directly connected to the





**Figure 6.4.** *Dun an Sticer, North Uist – a prehistoric Atlantic roundhouse with Late Medieval modification and reoccupation.*

powerful Lordship of the Isles, which broadly existed from the mid-twelfth to the late fifteenth century AD. Between 1990 and 1998, excavations led by David Caldwell (Caldwell 2010, 2010a) allowed the team to conduct relatively dry excavations on some 80 sq. m of previously submerged lochbed (Caldwell 1997, 19). The loch contains three islets, two of which are artificial. Towards the southern end of the loch Eilean Mhuireill exists as an artificial sub-circular crannog measuring some 30 × 50 m at its base, with a usable living area of approximately 17.5 × 12.5 m (Holley 1995, 20). Local tradition indicates that Eilean Mhuireill served as a prison for the Lords of the Isles, visible through the remains of two sub-rectangular structures measuring approximately 3 × 7 m internally (Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland 1984, 154). Holley investigated the site as part of his PhD fieldwork in the Inner Hebrides (Holley 2000) and subsequently discovered the crannog was situated in water too deep for causeway construction, thus requiring a boat for access (Holley 2000, 210) further strengthening its attractiveness as a prison.

However, it is the second completely artificial islet, Eilean na Comhairle, located at the northern end of the loch, which provides one of the best examples of high-status medieval reuse of a prehistoric crannog in Scotland. Eilean na Comhairle, or ‘Council Island’ is a completely artificial Iron Age crannog some 30 m in diameter. Radiocarbon dating of structural timbers indicates an initial construction phase from the second century BC, with a second phase of revitalization taking place some seven to eight centuries later, on the cusp of the late Iron Age/Early Medieval transition in the fifth to sixth centuries AD (Caldwell 2010, 49). Notably, the crannog later served as the principal residence for John, First Lord of the Isles (AD 1329–1380). This crannog is in turn associated with Eilean Mor some 50 m away, a substantially larger natural island which, in contrast to most natural islets near crannogs, holds the remains of some seven structures, including chapels. This reuse of Eilean na Comhairle in Loch Finlaggan during the Medieval Period indicates both symbolic and pragmatic motivations. As control over much of Atlantic Scotland was contested in the centuries

following the MacDonalds rise to power, crannogs would have served not only as pragmatic boltholes during periods of unrest, but as centres of political power and control by virtue of the reoccupation of ancient places in the landscape. In this regard, as the MacDonalds were the last in a long line of descendants from the obscure Somerled MacGillebrigte in the twelfth century, these seemingly obscure crannogs today in the Inner Hebrides actually served as a centralized location along the western Scottish seaboard from which to rule this maritime-based kingdom of Medieval Scotland.

While historical references to the islands extend as far back as the fourteenth century, by the late seventeenth century records indicate the dwellings were then in a ruinous state. (Celoria 1959). The 'castle' on Eilean Mor now survives as a substantial foundation underlying two later buildings, containing robust walling some 1.5 m in thickness (Caldwell 1993, 63). However, the choice of the smaller crannog Eilean na Comhairle as the site for the Lord's centre, as opposed to the much larger adjacent natural island is telling here, as is the location and limited access. This desire to occupy a place seen as apart and therefore exclusive readily highlights the notion that a rather humble crannog in Loch Finlaggan was in effect, the administrative hub of a far-reaching maritime kingdom. While not all crannogs were 'fit for a king', it is apparent during the mid- to late Medieval Period in Scotland that a growing number of crannogs were occupied by persons of at least some status, such as landholders (Gaelic *Lairds*) or the growing class of 'fear-taic' or tacksmen. This societal stratum consisted of middle-ranking men who rented *taic* or a plot of land from the freeholder (i.e. Scottish Lairds) and subsequently sub-let it amongst their immediate kin or close clansmen. To this end, tacksmen appear to have been the primary occupants of many island dwellings, particularly in the Hebrides, during the Medieval and Post-Medieval periods (Raven 2005).

Ultimately, Loch Finlaggan stands as a notable exemplification of a Post-Norse return to prehistoric crannogs. The underlying importance stressed here is the association of crannogs with royalty and regional control on a scale previously unseen in Scotland through the archaeological record alone.

### Buiston

Moving to the Scottish mainland, another example of reuse after extended abandonment is represented at Buiston, Ayrshire, which was initially excavated by the antiquarian Munro in the late nineteenth century (Munro 1882) and again in 1989–90 by Crone (Crone

2000). An important aspect of the later excavation was the application of dendrochronological dating, which has supplemented the radiocarbon results from the site. This data provide two discrete windows of activity: initial construction in the late first and early second centuries AD, followed by much later rejuvenation and reoccupation during the sixth to mid-seventh centuries AD with tree-ring dates falling between AD 520 and 668 (Crone 2000, 55, 160).

From a diagnostic standpoint, the later assemblage at Buiston included sherds of Continental E-ware, part of a crossbow mechanism (nut), eight knife blades and three spearheads amongst other metal objects. Notably, this artefactual evidence did not yield any material that would bridge the gap between construction and secondary reuse during the Early Historic Period, creating a gap of roughly three and a half centuries between these phases. If the occurrence of weapons such as spears, and the crossbow nut were intended for more than hunting, these artefacts suggest that crannog occupation by the early Medieval Period had perhaps taken on an increasingly defensive nature. Whether this perceived shift in use simply reflects a bias in the recovered material culture, in contrast to more benign, domestic assemblages from prehistoric occupation (i.e. quernstones, wooden vessels and lithics), it nevertheless suggests an expansion in the role of islet use beyond simple households or seasonal settlements.

### Ederline and Loch Awe

Crannog reuse and reoccupation is again visible at Loch Awe in Perthshire, the first loch to be systematically inspected for crannogs by divers in 1972. This massive effort resulted in the documentation of 20 artificial islets (McArdle 1973) which provides a clear indication of the intensity in artificial islet activity within several of the larger Highland lochs. One of the sites examined was Ederline crannog which exists as a seasonally submerged, sub-circular mound measuring some 37 m by 27 m and c. 2.5 m in height at the southern end of Loch Awe (McArdle 1973; Cavers & Henderson 2005, 285). Initial radiocarbon samples produced an Early Iron Age date of 790–520 cal. BC (SUERC-20205) from an oak pile, yet rather than finding prehistoric artefacts, excavation in 2004 by Cavers & Henderson instead revealed sherds of E-ware from the sixth or early seventh centuries AD (Cavers 2006, 290). A reference in the Irish Annals indicates that *Etarlindu*, believed to be Ederline, was the site of a pitched battle between the Picts and the Scotti in AD 736 (Lane & Campbell 2000, 25) providing additional support for the reuse of prehistoric crannogs as contested places in the Early Historic Period.



### Returning to (un)familiar places

While space prevents a detailed narrative of the sites briefly discussed above, the archaeological and historic records underscore a number of motives behind crannog reoccupation, ranging from the intentional reuse of a well-known structure to perhaps coincidental opportunistic reoccupation of an existing islet. The prominence of islet settlements is another aspect that lends itself to notions of control in the landscape – if not in the purely political sense – one of control over the surrounding arable land (Morrison 1985, 78). Occupied islets are visible from great distances in comparison to many ‘terrestrial’ sites. This suggests that the residents sought to reoccupy crannogs as an impressive and easily defended form of settlement, one which may have previously existed as a ruin and known in local memory for countless generations yet was renewed to its apparent former glory once again. Given the practicalities of living on crannogs, especially in rugged areas such as the Scottish Highlands or the Western Isles, many islets located within the larger Highland lochs would have also served as important nodal points in the landscape, because of their situation within water-based arteries of communication and travel.

One pragmatic aspect of crannog reuse is that reinvigoration or maintenance of the site, even after centuries of abandonment, would have required less effort in contrast to the laborious initial construction phase. Today, this is evident when one considers the number of crannogs which still survive above the loch level despite episodic periods of flooding or severe storms. The thick vegetation which commonly covers these sites helps to consolidate the core of the crannog mound, while waterlogged timber piles retain much of their original strength which further prevents the mass from slumping. Therefore, a site that has ‘only’ been abandoned for several centuries, could become inhabitable once again with a brief but intensive spate of repair. As driving new timber piles into stone mounds is impractical, if not impossible, this new occupation phase would often involve enlargement of the crannog mound itself, at which point timbers could then be readily inserted into the silty lochbed along new margins (*cf* Harding 2000, 305).

Specific motives for crannog reuse range from the opportunistic, short-term reoccupation of existing sites during periods of political insecurity, to more opaque considerations of ancestry, legacy, tradition and identity (Lenfert 2012, 39). The reuse of sites which already contain an associated legacy would provide a convincing display of authority not easily dismissed by others. As Cavers (Cavers 2006, 146) states: ‘occupation of ancient islet sites must have been a very deliberate

undertaking, designed to create a tangible connection to the past’. On a similar level, other scholars have argued that ‘that all prehistoric societies orientated their actions in the present with the past in mind’, making ‘a distinction between genealogical history, where the past is created through links to known ancestors, and mythical history, where a less well-known past is evoked’ (Gosden & Lock 1998, 2). Therefore, conceptual stimuli such as legitimacy via reoccupation, symbolism and status can be viewed as key drivers behind the longevity of the Scottish island dwelling tradition. By incorporating these non-tangible factors into narratives regarding crannogs, a more meaningful discussion of the tradition as a whole becomes more readily available. Conversely, more traditional, pragmatic explanations behind crannog use – primarily as defensive strongholds – can now be at least partially deconstructed in favour of deeper, underlying motives for reoccupation. As with many similar archaeological debates, there is no neat, singular explanation as to why Scottish crannogs were constructed and occupied (and subsequently reoccupied) over such a tremendous timespan. However, when the wider spectrum of motives discussed above are presented within a site-specific context, such as Dun an Sticer or Loch Finlaggan, the transposition of legacy through the occupation of ancient places becomes much more apparent.

In closing, despite a lengthy history of scholarly interest in Scottish island dwellings and crannogs, the reality is that crannog studies have been neither consistent in nature, nor well-developed in a regional sense, while still reliant upon many interpretations first cultivated in the nineteenth century. These issues may leave many modern archaeologists with a mottled view of this phenomenon. Lack of investigation is still a primary issue given the hundreds of sites which have largely gone unnoticed, while finding the funding and sustained commitment required to send trained archaeologists diving in Scottish lochs remains another formidable barrier, despite the proven abundance of high-quality finds that results from underwater archaeology here. Typical drivers of new archaeological discoveries such as commercial development play virtually no role in islet studies, unless located in a drained loch. Therefore, the impetus is upon research-driven archaeology to advance our current understanding of the Scottish crannog tradition. In this regard, the author is committed to building upon his research in the future to carry out more investigation, particularly in a Neolithic Hebridean context. With that said, the brief case-studies presented above will hopefully form one element from which to develop and expand new theoretical approaches to the remarkable longevity, reuse and memory contained which typify the Scottish island dwelling tradition.

