ISLANDS, ISLETS, EXPERIENCE & IDENTITY IN THE OUTER HEBRIDEAN IRON AGE

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with exploring aspects of experience and the creation of place within the Iron Age landscapes of the Atlantic islands of the Outer Hebrides as a means of addressing questions of social identity. These prehistoric landscapes are defined primarily by monumental domestic roundhouse sites, brochs, duns and wheelhouses, which are typically found on the low-lying west coast of the islands or on small islets within freshwater lochs. In this paper the evidence for varying scales of island experience and identity in the Outer Hebridean Iron Age is explored. It is argued that the island, and the islet dwelling, more specifically, were central to the everyday experiences of these Iron Age communities, albeit in varying guises; and was a key component in the creation of domestic places and a mechanism for expressing and reinforcing social identity within this Iron Age society.

Keywords

Experience, identity, Scottish islands, Outer Hebrides, Iron Age

1. Theoretical Perspective: Islands, landscapes and experience

The aim of this article is to explore domestic places and everyday landscapes from the perspective of human experience as a means of understanding Iron Age society and social identity in the Outer Hebrides. While investigations of place and landscape as experiential phenomena have come to play an increasingly vital role within European archaeology, there has been a tendency for such approaches to concentrate upon Neolithic and Bronze Age periods with a focus upon 'special' or 'ritual' landscapes (although notable exceptions include (Bender, Hamilton and Tilley, 1997, 2007; Hamilton and Whitehouse, 2006: 2007). In comparison, such approaches remain conspicuously lacking from the core of Iron Age research and from studies of the Outer Hebridean Iron Age more specifically (Rennell, 2008). The importance of place and landscape in the structuring of *everyday* or domestic life are ideas well developed in the sociology of Anthony Giddens (1984) and the social geography of Allen Pred (1984: 1990), both of whom develop upon Hagerstrand's theory of 'Time-Geography' (1967) and his concern with the spatio-temporal character of daily life. These ideas are not inconsistent with a range of phenomenological approaches within archaeology (Tilley, 1994), in which it is emphasised that people come to know, understand and act in the world through their very physical experience of 'being in the world', to use the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty's phraseology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). These positions inform the theoretical and

methodological framework of this research. Importantly, concern with everyday Iron Age experiences associated with the Outer Hebrides demands from that outset consideration of these landscapes as island landscapes and Iron Age settlement sites as places within islands. Given that a great number of known Iron Age settlement sites are in fact located on small islets within inland loch systems - islands within islands - further reinforces the importance of considering the nature of island experiences and the concept of island dwelling within this research.

Within archaeology there is a growing area of discussion and theoretical debate relating to the archaeological study of islands and although the majority of this debate focuses upon Mediterranean, Caribbean and south-east Asian islands, much of these discussions are of equal relevance to the study of Atlantic islands. Much of this recent interest can be traced back to Cyprian Broodbank's publication *The Archaeology of the Early Cyclades* (Broodbank, 2000) which along with a number of other contemporary articles sought to challenge traditional approaches to islands and general island stereotypes (see also Gosden and Head, 1994 and Rainbird, 2007). Traditional archaeological approaches had come to regard islands as laboratories for the study of culture change and human-environment relationships within a distinctly evolutionary framework (Evans, 1973; Cherry, 1981). Revisionist island approaches alternatively emphasise the uniqueness and diversity of the world's islands and the need to study islands in their own right. Rather than viewing islands as stereo-typically isolated or marginal, archaeologists now consider the potential connectedness and dynamism of island communities and their pivotal, rather than dependent, relationship with mainland societies. Many of these revised approaches can be related to broader trends within archaeology toward more self-critical and interpretive frameworks in which modern perceptions and assumptions of the archaeologist are rightly challenged. For example, Broodbank contests the modern western association of islands with "political utopias, nostalgic idylls and savage fantasies" (2000: 6). Others have highlighted the literary use of islands as metaphors for isolation and the ideological and political mythologising of island communities (Sulivan, 2008; Fleming, 2008). The appropriateness of the individual island, as an unproblematic or easily defined area for archaeological analysis, has also been questioned. It is often assumed, for example, that one of the advantages of studying islands is that they have 'nice clear edges', that their boundaries are defined and therefore, for the archaeologists, the study area is fixed. This is, however, a simplistic and naive perspective of island geographies. The simple presence of a harsh island interior might well enable closer contact and familiarity with neighbouring coastal islands than with regions across the same island. Therefore, while tantalisingly convenient for archaeologists, the island unit does not necessarily correlate with island experience or island identity. Instead the unit of study is often more appropriately some form of archipelago as opposed to the individual island (Broodbank, 2000). An obvious example relating to the Outer Hebrides are the so called islands of Lewis and Harris; although commonly regarded as separate islands, Lewis and Harris are in fact a single land mass, separated not by sea but by mountains. The outcome of this island geography is that Harris has greater historical and cultural links with North Uist and the islands in the Sound of Harris that it does with Lewis.
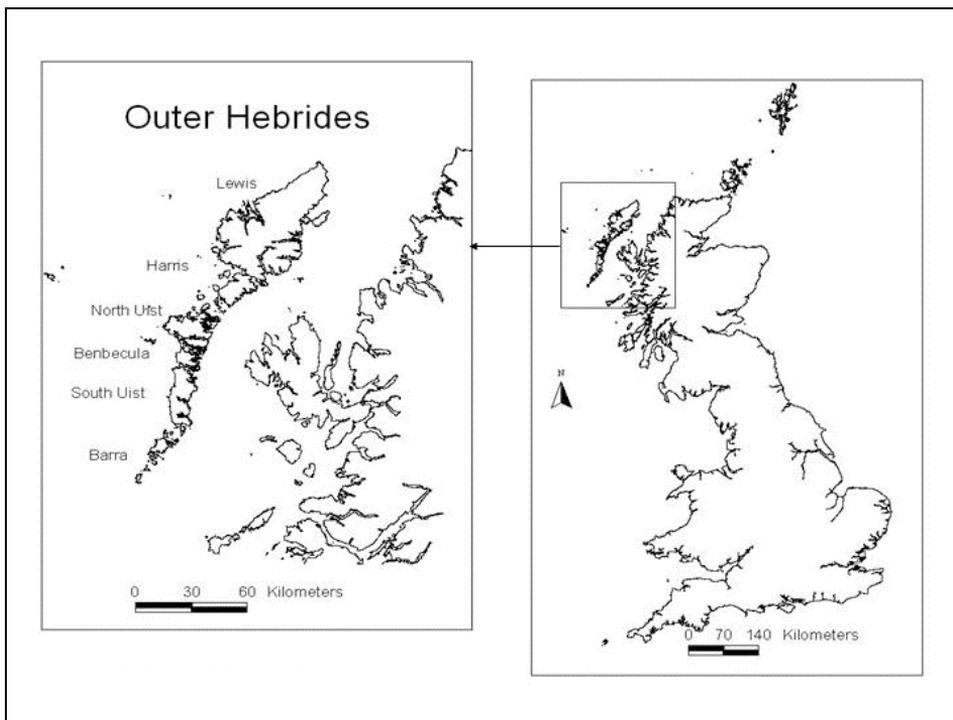
Figure 1 – Location of Outer Hebrides

With these theoretical perspectives in mind, it is argued that the investigation of places of Iron Age settlement and the wider Iron Age island landscape from the perspective of embodied experience provides an alternative method for exploring and comprehending the Outer Hebridean Iron Age. In the context of this research, an 'Island Approach' promotes a more in-depth consideration of the way in which islands are defined and perceived, raising for discussion the concepts of marginality, isolation and mainland-island communication. Furthermore, an 'Island Approach' provokes critical analysis of one's own views of islands and island dwelling and provides a stimulating position from which to think about experience and identity in the Outer Hebridean Iron Age. The method of investigation comprised field survey and GIS-based mapping and modelling of these Iron Age island landscapes. An initial field survey included extensive records of landscape location and the experiential qualities of place associated with 179 Iron Age Iron Age roundhouse sites across the Outer Hebrides. Records of landscape location included descriptions of local topography, underlying geology, soil, vegetation and an assessment of environmental impact. Records of experiential qualities of place included observations of visibility of the sea, with reference to comments made by Armit (1990b), visibility of various environmental zones, with reference to comments made by Cunliffe (1978) and Parker Pearson, Sharples and Symonds (2004), and the scale of landscape visibility, with reference to Fojout (1984). Photographs and field sketches of the surrounding landscape were also included. The results of this survey were incorporated into a GIS database. As a further means of analysis, the database was also used to model elements of landscape visibility. This included simple viewshed maps indicating potential areas of visibility from each site location utilising topography based line-of-

sight programmes. A further season of fieldwork, focused on a sub-sample of site locations. As a means of engaging with the wider landscape location, journeys were made to and from sites and the experiential qualities of these journeys recorded. In addition the audible and visual parameters for communication between people was extensively explored and this information entered into the geographical database. The overall objective of the research was to find ways of recording and communicating qualities of landscape and place as experiential phenomena in order to further our understanding of the communities that inhabited the Outer Hebrides during the Iron Age.

2. Outer Hebridean island archaeology

Having summarised the theoretical influences that have informed my research, I will provide a summary of Iron Age archaeology of the Outer Hebrides with reference to varying island scales of analysis. The aim is to explore how thinking about island experiences can contextualise the archaeological record and inform our understanding of Iron Age society and social identities. The Outer Hebrides are a group of islands located off the west coast of Scotland (Figure 1) separated from mainland Scotland since their formation some three billion years ago (Angus 1997). The modern archipelago exists on the periphery of the British Isles, both geographically and politically, and it is perhaps due to its current marginality that until recently the Outer Hebrides have existed on the fringe of mainstream archaeological research. Traditional studies of the Iron Age, saturated with theories of cultural diffusion, often perceived large parts of Scotland and the islands as existing on the margins of prehistoric cultural change, with little consideration for internal social or technological innovation (Hawkes, 1959; Piggott, 1966). Revision and critique of these traditional interpretations, however, have brought the Outer Hebrides back from this marginal position and there has since been an explosion of interest in this area and a desire to consider alternative perspectives. Most notably has been the work of Edinburgh University and its Callanish research project based in Lewis (Armit and Harding, 1990; Harding and Gilmour, 2000; Harding and Dixon, 2000; Armit, 2006) and SEARCH, a Sheffield University and Cardiff University collaborative project focusing on the southern islands of South Uist and Barra (Parker Pearson and Sharples, 1999; Parker Pearson et al, 2004; Branigan and Foster, 1995, 2002). An alternative map view, for example, instead places the Outer Hebrides at the centre of a busy Atlantic sea-way, with the islands of Orkney and Shetland to the north, Ireland to the south-west and to the south the Inner Hebrides and the Isle of Man**.** Historical documents and archaeological evidence testify to the fact that Scandinavian migrants 'island hopped' through this area and during the medieval period that the Hebridean islands were established as the centre for the Lord of the Isles (Crawford, 1997; Graham-Campbell and Batey, 2001; MacDonald, 1997). In prehistory therefore, the Outer Hebrides were not necessarily isolated but, by their very nature, potentially well connected.

 The Middle Iron Age in the Outer Hebrides (c400 BC – 200 AD) is characterised principally by the use of decorated pottery and the widespread establishment of permanent and monumental, domestic structures on a previously unprecedented scale. These monumental Iron Age structures include brochs, duns and wheelhouses **(**Figure 2)**.** Brochs are large, drystone built roundhouses associated with tower-like proportions and a range of complex architectural features including hollowed or concentric walling, intra-mural galleries and stairs, scarcement ledges for secondary flooring, guard cells

and long, narrow entrance passages. The term dun is used to describe smaller towers without evidence for these more specific architectural features. Wheelhouses are also drystone built roundhouses, but are distinctive by the presence of radial piers that subdivide the interior roundhouse space into small bays arranged around a central area frequently containing a hearth. These cultural phenomena associate the Iron Age of the Outer Hebrides with the wider area of Atlantic Scotland, encompassing the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland, the Inner Hebridean islands and large parts of Scotland's Atlantic west coast. This Atlantic region of Scotland was identified by Stuart Piggot as one of his principal *provinces* of the Scottish Iron Age (1966), an expansion of Gordon Childe's view of *cultural groupings* in Scotland (1935) and Hawkes' scheme for British Iron Age societies (1959). Whilst it is no longer adequate to simply equate artefact or site typologies with definitive prehistoric cultural groups, across this region the construction of Atlantic roundhouses, in particular the distinctive and highly monumental Broch sites, and the ubiquitous use of decorated pottery, notably scarce elsewhere in northern British Iron Age contexts, highlights similarities in Iron Age traditions that suggest a degree of shared identity and/or cultural contact across this area. It is clearly not irrelevant that we are dealing with island and coastal communities - it is highly credible to believe that it was *because* these were islands, connected by the sea, that broad cultural similarities could be maintained across fairly large distances (Henderson, 2000; MacKie, 2000) and this provides an example of how islands can stimulate connections and contact rather than social isolation. For Iron Age people then, being 'islanders' was potentially central to their society and social identity. It was the fact that these people lived on islands that brought these places together - facilitating the sharing of material culture, the knowledge and desire to build monumental architecture and perhaps with these things, shared ideologies and a sense of identity with other island communities within the Atlantic region. At the regional island scale, the character of Iron Age identity might therefore be defined as one of inter-island *connectivity.*

Although shared architectural traditions and the use of decorated pottery enable us to identify a fairly distinctive Atlantic Scottish Iron Age, the archaeology of the Outer Hebrides also exhibit several regionally specific elements. Whilst monumental roundhouses are common to Atlantic Scotland, the development of these forms of domestic architecture differs significantly throughout. Simple forms of the Atlantic roundhouses, dating to the earliest end of the Iron Age, are, as yet, only known from the Northern Isles and instead in the Outer Hebrides excavation can only confirm the presence of complex forms of these sites (Armit, 1992; Harding and Dixon, 2000; Harding and Gilmour, 2000; Parker Pearson et al, 1999). These observations have contributed to arguments for a Northern Isles provenance for this architectural tradition and subsequent adoption in its more develop form by surrounding Iron Age island communities. Wheelhouse sites, whilst fairly prolific across the Outer Hebrides, as a distinctive form of Iron Age roundhouse appear to be entirely absent in the Orkney islands, in other respects regarded as the typecast for the Atlantic Iron Age. Intriguingly, however, wheelhouse sites *are* recorded in the Shetland islands. While decorated pottery is common throughout the area, the quantity and variety of decorated forms across the Outer Hebridean islands is particularly striking and analysis of pottery decoration and fabric indicate regionally and even site-specific styles and forms of manufacture (Campbell, 2002; Henderson, 2000; MacKie, 2002; Hunter, 2007; Lane, 1990; Topping, 1986, 1987). Unlike other areas within mainland Iron Age Britain, there is limited evidence for imported metalwork and other 'exotic' items in the Outer Hebrides (Hunter, 2007). Particularly within a familiar and everyday context, the use of distinctive

wheelhouse type architecture, the lack of imported items and evidence for high levels of pottery variation across the Outer Hebrides indicates that identities may have been initiated and played-out at a more local scale. Furthermore, whilst the occasional la Tene brooch recovered from Iron Age contexts indicates an awareness of the wider British Iron Age world, the overall paucity of evidence for metalwork and in particularly local forms of decorative metalworking, suggests communities more preoccupied with local rather than regional Iron Age trends. In light of this evidence, Armit alternatively describes the Iron Age of Atlantic Scotland as comprising increasingly 'inward looking' communities (Armit, 1997). This apparent evidence for isolation might be explicable in terms of the increasing environmental and economic marginalisation of the islands during this period[1] (Armit, 1998). Branigan and Foster (2002) have suggested that these types of environmental factors exerted increasing pressures on Iron Age farming communities and a consequence would have been limited resources for use in reciprocal exchange exacerbating isolation and 'self-reliance' (Branigan and Foster, 2002). Conversely, the settlement evidence suggests a fairly thriving Iron Age population, and we should be careful not to interpret evidence for cultural insularity as simply negative or externally imposed: as Tilley argues with regard to the prehistoric islands of Malta, people may have "actively created difference to establish and maintain their own identity" (Tilley, 2004: 89). Nevertheless, at the scale of the archipelago, the archaeology can be used to argue an alternative view of Iron Age island society, associated with local rather than regional concerns.

Figure 2 - Monumental domestic Iron Age architecture. Dun Torcuil, North Uist

Beyond the archipelago, the Outer Hebrides comprises individual islands, with a diversity of environments, landscapes and prehistoric settlement patterns. The island of North Uist and Lewis represent potent examples of this diversity. North Uist and associated tidal islands are characterised by expansive inland loch systems. Along the western and northern coasts, these islands also boast extensive areas of fertile machair, a unique type of ecological environment formed from wind blown sands and comprising a number of different landscape elements including beaches, dunes, machair grasslands and hill machair (Angus, 2001). In contrast, the interior of the island of Lewis is dominated by blanket peat moorland[2]. Lewis has a more rugged western coastline with significantly less machair environments and notably fewer inland loch systems than are characteristic of North Uist. In terms of Iron Age settlement patterns, North Uist has concentration of known monumental settlement sites across the archipelago (39%), while Lewis, a considerably larger island, contains fewer than 15% of known sites. Comparing Iron Age settlement patterns with figures for medieval populations, Armit proposes that different islands would have supported different forms of social organisation, or systems of land tenure (Armit, 2002).

There are a number of potential taphonomic (decay-related) explanations for this discrepancy, yet even accounting for these processes it is reasonable to believe that there were notable differences in the number and density of sites between these two island regions (ibid). The evidence for earlier prehistoric occupation of these landscapes exhibit similar differences; On North Uist there is a concentration of early Neolithic burial tombs yet few later standing stone monuments, in contrast Lewis is home to the complex Later Neolithic/Early Bronze Age monumental landscape around Calanaish but has revealed comparatively few early Neolithic funerary structures. Of the 65 Iron Age sites surveyed on the island of North Uist more than 60% (n=40) were located on islets within freshwater lochs (see Table 1). These sites are fairly well distributed across the island landscape, occupying areas of the rocky eastern moorland, as well as west coast machair lochs and lochs within the island interior. 30% of site on North Uist were located on lowland coastal landscapes (almost exclusively on machair soil but also on coastal islets), and five sites located within upland moorland. No sites on North Uist were surveyed on coastal headlands.

On Lewis a similarly high proportion of sites were located on islets within freshwater lochs (53%). These sites were found mainly on the west coast of the island with virtually no known sites located within the interior. The notable difference from North Uist in terms of settlement pattern is the small number of lowland coastal sites (15%) and the relatively high number of coastal headland sites (30%). This discrepancy can be easily explained: these islands host different landscapes and therefore provide alternative options for situating monumental roundhouses. However, these alternative choices of location enable the creation of very different domestic places, where I argue that every day experiences and the nature of daily life would have unfolded in starkly contrasting ways. These simple differences indicate elements of increasingly localised patterns and characteristic of Iron Age settlement suggesting a local, perhaps island specific, social identity may have existed alongside a more regional Outer Hebridean and an even broader Atlantic Scottish social identity. The unit of study when it comes to these islands is clearly complex, and as demonstrated, current evidence for the Outer Hebridean Iron Age already suggests that narratives and concepts such as social identity can be realised at varying island scales.

Figures 3a-c - Experiences of islet sites. Dun Torcuil North Uist
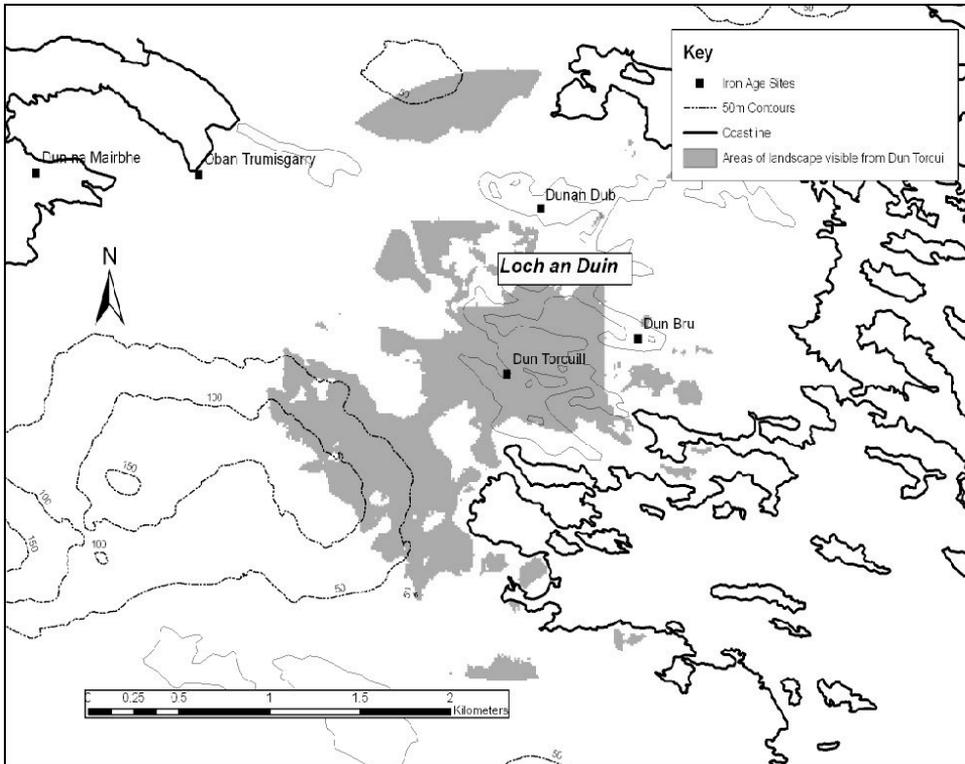
Figure 3a – Map and viewshed model from Dun Torcuil
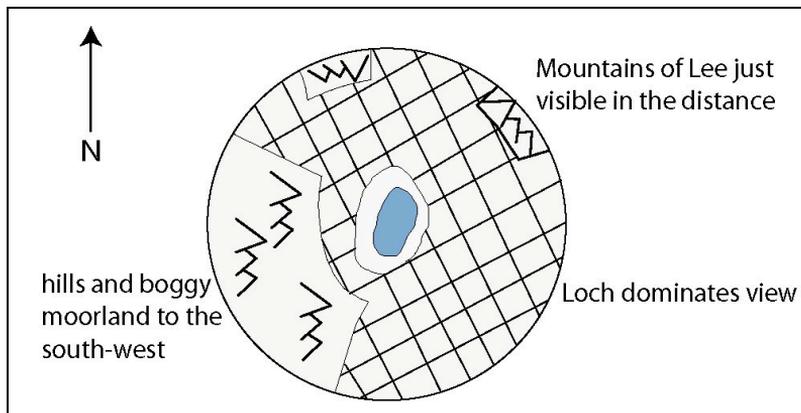
Figure 3b – sketch of visible landscape features from Dun Torcuil
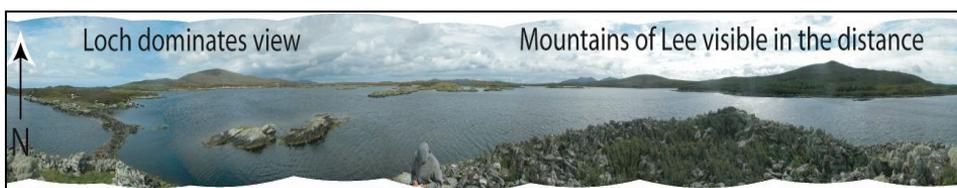
Figure 3c - Landscape panorama from Dun Torcuil

3. Iron Age islet dwellings

The individual Hebridean islands are not comprised of a single homogenous landscape and therefore the individual island is not the final scale in the island model. As noted above, a great number of monumental domestic Iron Age sites are located on islets in freshwater and sea lochs – commonly known as islet duns (Table 1). Islet settlements are not unique to the Iron Age in the Outer Hebrides. At Eillean Domhuil, for example, a multi-period islet site on North Uist, the earliest phases date to the Neolithic (Armit, 1996). However, it is during the Iron Age that settlement evidence and the use of islets as a distinct settlement location become particularly prevalent in the archaeological record. Studies of islet sites, including the study of crannogs across mainland Scotland[3], have tended to focus upon site identification, the determination of the artificial nature and construction of the islet itself, and the reconstruction of prehistoric lacustrine environments (Holley, 2000; Morrison, 1985). Minimal consideration has subsequently been given to the nature of islet dwelling, either practical or meaningful, or to the relationship between islet sites and the wider prehistoric landscape beyond the persistent assumption that these sites have defensive or refuge type functions.

These defence-based explanations correspond with traditional interpretations of Atlantic roundhouses, brochs in particular, as intentionally and conceptually defensive in function. More recently, however, the defensive qualities of these forms of architecture have been convincingly challenged, and it is now more readily accepted that their monumentality represents something more akin to a 'symbol of the legitimacy of the household within the locality' than a need to actually defend territory (Armit, 1997). Similarly, having visited numerous islet sites as part of this research, the defensive qualities of the islet location were found to be equally dubious. Furthermore, the simple explanation of these sites as either 'refuge' or 'defence' does not concord with the archaeological record, where significant evidence for frequent conflict or external threats remain absent, and is not only inadequate in terms of explaining why Iron Age people chose to build their homes on islets but also fails to explore how living in these places might have impacted upon people's everyday experiences and their interaction with the wider Iron Age landscape. If Atlantic roundhouses relate to ownership and identity, within the context of an 'island approach' and concepts of landscape experience, how might we alternatively understand these islet settlements?

Island	Landscape location			
	Islet (fresh water loch)	Lowland coastal	Coastal headland/upland	TOTAL
Barra	3	5	7	15
South Uist	20	9	5	34
Benbecula	13	2	-	15
North Uist (incl. Grismey and Baleshare)	40	20	5	65
Harris	1	1	3	5
Lewis (incl. Grt. Benera)	17	5	10	32
TOTAL	94	42	30	166

Table 1: location of Iron Age sites included in survey

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Through my own research, I found islet sites to afford distinctive qualities of landscape experience. The site of Dun Torcuil, a complex roundhouse or broch site constructed on an islet within Loch an Duin, on the island of North Uist, is a characteristic example of

these types of place (Figure 3) (see Armit, 1992; Beveridge, 1911). From Dun Torcuil, as at other islet sites, views of the landscape were found to be highly restricted and localised in nature and these places were frequently recorded as being within enclosed or bounded parts of the landscape (Figure 4). Views from Dun Torcuil were dominated by the surrounding loch. The distinctive mountains of north and south Lee were visible on the distant horizon and to the west boggy moorland hills overlook the site. Beyond the boundary of the loch, however, views of the immediate locality were very limited (Figure 4a). Viewshed models communicate these observations and descriptions of islet places, highlighting the contained area within which lines-of-sight can be maintained (Figure 4b).

Investigating the acoustic qualities of these places[4] revealed further senses of enclosure. Sounds emanating from Dun Torcuil could be heard echoing around the loch when located there, yet were frequently inaudible to recipients in the surrounding landscape - the local topography, effectively a basin, causing sound to reverberate and amplify within the banks of the loch but also to be trapped within this area and restrict audibility beyond this place. Two other potential Iron Age islet duns are found within the surrounding landscape of Dun Torcuil; Dun Bu within Loch Bu a subsidiary of Loch an Duin and Dunan Dubh. Yet despite the close proximity of these sites, inter-visibility and inter-audibility between these places was found to be minimal. Dun Torcuil, like many islet based sites, is found located some distance from the sea, the coast and the machair, relatively fertile, well-draining, alkaline soils, formed from wind blown sand (Angus, 2001; Ritchie, 1979).

Historically the machair has been the focus of low intensity agricultural production and traditional crofting practices (Boyd and Boyd, 1990; Lawson, 2004), and likely the preferred location for agricultural activities in the Outer Hebrides since the Neolithic and potentially of considerable important to Iron Age farming communities (Armit et al, 2004; Armit and Finlayson, 1996). The current extent of the machair system[5], however, remains out of sight from Dun Torcuil, as does the sea and the coast. Instead views from this site are limited to the loch itself and the surrounding rocky moorland. Returning to Dun Torcuil from the coastal machair the site and people within the immediate locality remained out of sight until reaching the banks of the loch, so that this Iron Age place remained concealed until within a distance of less than 20m of the site itself. Importantly, not all parts of the Iron Age community were living on islet sites. In contrast, a large number of monumental domestic Iron Age settlements are found in lowland coastal landscapes, within easy access of both the coastal machair and the sea. These places were found to have less restricted views of their local surroundings, and sites located within these landscape tended to afford high degrees of inter-visibility and inter-audibility (Table 2). Further investigation suggests that these would have been noisy, lively places where people carrying out daily activities, likely revolving around the cultivation of the immediate machair, would have been highly conspicuous. In contrast, daily experiences of places centred around islets would have emphasised a sense of insularity and removal from the wider social landscape further reinforced by the physical and perhaps symbolic boundary of the surrounding water.

Experiences of place and landscape	Landscape Location			
	Islet	**Lowland Coastal**	**Coastal Headland**	**Upland**
Proximity to sea, coast and fertile machair	-	X	X	X
Extensive visibility of sea, coast, machair	-	X	X	X
Restricted/localised landscape visibility	X	X	-	-
Sense of enclosure	X	-	-	-
Inter-site audibility	MINIMAL	HIGH	MINIMAL	MINMAL
Inter-site visibility	MINIMAL	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH

Table 2: Summary of experiences of Iron Age sites

Earlier in this paper the concept of island insularity was raised as a potentially desirable trait– islanders actively maintaining isolation in order to reaffirm social identity. If the establishment of monumental domestic architecture during the Iron Age is regarded as a symbolic means of legitimising rights to land, demonstrating ownership and local identity (Armit, 1997), how does an understanding of the wider landscape context and experiential qualities of these places further inform our understanding of Iron Age society? Perhaps certain Iron Age communities sought to actively harness these senses and experiences of isolation, associated with islet locations, in order to separate themselves from other parts of the community and to reinforce and maintain their identity. The creation of place within certain parts of the landscape might therefore have been a strategy, alongside the establishment of distinctively elaborate and monumental architecture, for demonstrating local ownership and social power. Alternatively, these senses and experiences of isolation were merely a by-product of a series of more complex decision-making strategies. Nevertheless, the daily experiences of these places, the contrast between experiences of everyday insularity and the more communal dwellings on the lowland coastal machair, would undoubtedly have contributed to the shaping of different social relationships and senses of identity during the Outer Hebridean Iron Age whether intentional or not.

To define islet sites as enclosed and isolated places, however, overlooks the possibility of water-based communication. By their very nature, islet sites are surrounded by water[6] and access requires either the use of boat or traversing a causeway. It is unclear

whether the majority of Iron Age islet sites were built with causeways or not; original causeways may well have eroded inhibiting their identification, can be concealed by rising water levels or where examples survive may not be contemporary with Iron Age occupation[7]. For these reasons it is reasonable to consider that water based travel was potentially an intimate part of islet dwelling during the Iron Age, although little consideration has previously been given to the use of boats in association with these sites and the wider landscape connections that this might have afforded Iron Age occupants. With respect to crannog sites in mainland Scotland, Morrison (1985) has described how 'finger' lochs would have allowed people to traverse some of Scotland's most inhospitable terrain. Similarly, McGail (2001: 171) talks of tides and tidal flows being utilised within Atlantic estuaries to provide a 'free ride' on the basis of tidal propulsion and I have myself used similar tactics in order to access Iron Age sites across Loch Ephort in North Uist. Sadly there is no direct evidence for the use of boats in association with Outer Hebridean Iron Age sites. However, the evidence for the use of simple log boats across Atlantic Europe abound, ranging in date from the Mesolithic through to the Iron Age and into historical periods and twenty-seven log boat related remains have been recovered from highland Scotland in close association with crannog sites. It therefore seems increasingly likely, given the simplicity of log boat design and their considerably suitability to the Outer Hebridean environment, that similar forms of log boats were utilised at some point during the Outer Hebridean Iron Age.

Re-considering the landscape surrounding Dun Torcuil with a mind to water based travel, one can hypothesize a number of potential access routes between Loch an Duin and regions much further a field via the sea lochs of Loch Blathaisbhal, Loch Dheoir and Loch Portain. Historical links between the area of Loch Portain and the major township of Loch Maddy, on the east coast of the island, are well document (Lawson, 2004), places that via the sea are a mere two miles apart but today within an overly road-reliant transport system, become completely unrelated areas, seven road miles distant. Access between the Loch an Duin and Loch Bu sites, described above, was found to differ considerably between land and water based forms of transport. Travelling between Dun Torcuil and Dunan Dubh on foot involved navigating oneself around the perimeter of Loch an Duin, with limited visibility of the general geography of the area and the destination locales. In contrast, this journey by boat significantly reduced the time and distance between these places and provided a different perspective on their potential relationship. The experience of this Iron Age landscape therefore differs considerably if one considers water as connecting rather than isolating these places. Returning to the themes raised in association with an 'Island Approach', it appears that islet sites can also be understood to combine elements of isolation and connection. The physical expression of separation by water and the experiences of a insular and marginalised local landscape may have, perhaps by design, facilitated a means of expressing local identity along with the use of specifically monumental domestic architecture. At the same time, these locations might also have provided Iron Age occupants of these sites with links to other parts of the landscape through the complex loch and sea loch systems that would have dominated this Iron Age environment. This alternative knowledge and experience of the landscape may well have reaffirmed differences within the community between islet dwelling and lowland coastal dwelling sections of this Iron Age society.

Conclusions

By drawing upon issues and debates raised as part of an 'Island Approach' this paper has explored a variety of perspectives on the nature of the Outer Hebridean Iron Age. The scale of analysis has included the wider island region of Atlantic Scotland, the island archipelago of the Outer Hebrides as well as the individual island. These different scales have supported various interpretations of the Iron Age archaeology and the nature of island dwelling, incorporating the concept of island experience and identity as insular, marginal, remote, as well as interactive, dynamic and connected. At the scale of the individual dwelling, examining the role of islet settlements from the perspective of human experience has provided similarly contrasting interpretations. It has been suggested that the establishment of monumental domestic settlements on islets, places associated with experiential qualities of separation and removal from the wider Iron Age landscape, may have been strategies for reinforcing local identities within this Iron Age society. At the same time, by considering the possibilities for water-based travel, the potential for external contact and interaction with wider regions has also been posited. Rather than contradicting one another, these various interpretations reveal some of the complexities of experience and concepts of island identity and begin to suggest the workings of a complex Iron Age society incorporating differing knowledge and experience of the social landscape, varying social perspectives, identities and social practices.

Endnotes:

[1] Analysis of pollen core samples indicates an increase in taxa associated with the expansion of peat during the Iron Age. Evidence that Iron Age communities needed to combat changing environmental conditions have been identified at sites such as Loch na Berie, Cnip and Dun Vulan.

[2] Peat was apparently absent from soil profiles found beneath the chambered cairns of Unival (Mills, 1994), however, it is likely that for the most part the peat had already started to develop at this time. Evidence from Lewis and South Uist, suggest that by the Iron Age, as today, peat had already encroached the majority of the central island zone (Bennett et al, 1990; Edwards et al, 1994).

[3] The term crannog is associated with artificially or partially artificial islet sites mainly of timber construction. These types of site are found widely across mainland Scotland and Ireland associated with prehistoric and medieval dates. The term islet dun is generally associated with sites of substantial stone superstructures and natural bedrock foundations as found in the Inner and Outer Hebridean islands. However, a number of islet duns appear to have been artificially reinforced during their occupation and consequently the distinction between crannogs and islet duns is somewhat vague and perhaps misleading.

[4] Investigations of sound and acoustic qualities of place were based upon the audibility of a human voices shouting.

[5] Models of machair development suggest that during the Iron Age the machair would

not have extended as far inland as it does today (Ritchie, 1979a). Hence, visibility of the machair from Dun Torcuil would have been even less probable during the Iron Age than in the present landscape.

[6] Some sites are tidal islets and therefore not always cut off from the shore. In other examples lochs have been drained or dammed in more recent periods and this has changed the loch environment. It is presumed, however, that in most cases these sites were constructed as islets and to have been either permanently or at least temporarily surrounded by water.

[7] Many islet sites were re-occupied in the early historic period and re-used as shepherd's shelters and robbed of their stone in more recent times. A common practice still used today is to keep livestock on small islands, in particular to separate ewes and rams at certain times of year. Consequently, causeways have been reinforced, rebuilt and perhaps constructed anew in a number of cases. The Iron Age islet site of Dun Bharabhat, Lewis, is a case in point, where the causeway to this site has been substantially reinforced in order to allow safe access by the archaeologists who excavated this site in the 1980s.

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