ScARF Scottish Archaeological Research Framework

Regional Archaeological Research Framework for Argyll

Chapter 7. The Iron Age



Revetted enclosure wall at Barnluasgan © Kilmartin Museum

7. The Iron Age

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Brief Summary

The introduction of a new metal, in the form of iron, seems to have co-incided with a deterioration in the climate around 600 -700 BC. Ritual sites and places of burial are no longer the physical focus of community activity and living sites become the most prominent evidence for this period. Some, known as Duns and Forts, appear on hill tops in prominent places in the landscape, others, such as crannogs, were constructed on artificial or natural islands in inland lochs. Stone towers known as Brochs are also found, but they are less common in Argyll than elsewhere in Scotland and alongside duns have been reclassified or known archaeologically as Atlantic roundhouses. Although there are some notable exceptions, relatively few sites in Argyll have been excavated, meaning that we don't have a very good understanding of the Iron Age in Argyll. From what little evidence there is, we can understand social organisation to be hierarchical, with the size and prominence of dwelling perhaps marking the status of the people living there. A carved wooden figure in the form of a female human found at Ballachulish, which has been dated to the early Iron Age, gives us a tantalising glimpse into what was undoubtedly a complex system of beliefs.

7.1 The Iron Age: 700 BC – AD 500

7.1 Introduction

The intent of this paper is to outline a brief history of excavation of Iron Age sites in Argyll and how these contribute to our current understanding of the period. A discussion on the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age has not been included at this stage. This is definitely something, however, which merits further work and, as such, is included as one of the research questions in Section 7.6. Given the limited extent of this piece there is no room to repeat the often heated discussions that got us to where we are, although it touches on some of the more important, and in some cases ongoing, discourse. The paper then concentrates on the excavated evidence and suggests where we might take this in the future.

7.2 The Chronological Framework of Scotland's Iron Age

Important to the ongoing debate is of course when the Iron Age begins and ends. The date 600BC was used by the Royal Commission on the Historic and Ancient Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) for the inception of the Iron Age in Scotland and used in its Argyll Inventories (RCAHMS; 1971, 1975, 1980, 1982, 1984, 1988, 1992). Some researchers, such as Harding and the Ritchies, have argued for an earlier C7th-C8th BC date and it has become increasingly common to discuss the late Bronze Age/early Iron Age together with no hard delineation between the periods (Harding 1974; Ritchie and Ritchie 1981, Hunter and Ralston 2015). Similarly, the termination of the Iron Age in Scotland is often framed by the broader agendas of individual researchers; whereby the Roman invasion in the C1st AD or their withdrawal from their northern frontier in the C3rd AD have been used. This period, in a modified form, is still used by some researchers in order to distinguish the Picts from earlier Iron Age cultures (Piggott 1966; Hingley 1992, Armit 1997; Armit and Ralston 2003,). However, it has become increasingly common to view Scotland's Iron Age as part of a much longer period of development with the adoption of the 'long Iron Age' seen by some to continue until the arrival of the Norse in the late C8th AD with the traditionally defined Iron Age 'merging imperceptibly' into the Early Medieval period (Armit 1997). This has led towards a more integrated study across inherited chronological boundaries as epitomised by the First Millennia Studies Group. The breaking down of inherited chronological boundaries in recent research perhaps suggests there is no need for a universally accepted chronological scheme for the Scottish Iron Age, although this paper will adopt age brackets of 800BC to AD400, to dovetail with the

earlier and later period discussions.

7.3 Previous accounts of Argyll's Iron Age

Some of the earliest references to Argyll's Iron Age remains appear within the 'Old' and 'New' Statistical Accounts of Scotland, these often appearing as descriptions of parish antiquities (Statistical Accounts of Scotland 1791-99 Volume 5 and 1834-45 Volume 7). These predominately mention 'forts', 'castles' or 'watchtowers', or other 'ancient defences' many only briefly mentioned if they were significant remains or had traditional tales attached to them, reflecting the close relationship of educated ecclesiastics and early antiquarianism.

The collecting, recording and reporting of antiquities was given a formal framework with the founding of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1780 and from 1856 provided a more systematic framework for reporting survey and excavation results in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (PSAS). The locations of many these defended sites were surveyed during the compilation of the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey maps, often accompanied by brief descriptions within the associated name books.

Area surveys of the forts and duns of Argyll appeared in PSAS from the late 19th century but sites were also reported within other publications. These include those in Lorne (Smith; 1871, 1872 and 1875, Christison 1889; Watson 1914), Mid Argyll (Currie 1830; Christison 1904, Graham 1948; Campbell and Sandeman 1962; Scott 1966) and Cowal (Honeymann 1890). Antiquities on the Argyll islands received similar attention with monuments noted on Bute (Hewison 1893), Coll and Tiree (Sands 1882; Beveridge 1903), Mull (Duns 1883; MacLean 1923), Luing, Seil and the Garvallachs (MacAdam 1896), Colonsay and Oransay (Stevenson 1881, Symington Grieve 1923; Piggott and Piggott 1948), Arran (MacArthur 1873), Gigha (Anderson 1939) and Islay (Childe 1935a). Much of this survey work informed the list or Inventory of Scotland's surviving heritage compiled by the RCAHMS after its establishment in 1908. The RCAHMS published seven volumes covering Argyll, the first published in 1971 and the last completed in 1992. The RCAHMS volumes provided overall summaries of Argyll's Iron Age in their respective areas, while broader syntheses of the period have been undertaken by other authors (Neike 1984; 1990; Ritchie 1997, Harding; 1997, 2004a; Armit 2004). The RCAHMS classifications adopted for forts, duns and enclosures, along with other possible sites dating to the Iron Age in the first volume has led to much discussion over their continued suitability and while the categories have enabled comparative analysis it has also conversely constrained discussion on other types of more ephemeral structures that may also be present in this period.

Attempts have also been made by various academics to culturally bracket the regions of Scotland in the Iron Age. Argyll for example, was seen by Gordon Childe as belonging to one of his 'cultural groupings' (Childe 1935b) while Stuart Piggott saw Argyll as a region within a larger Atlantic province (Piggott 1966). Some later researchers have argued for different definitions of these 'provinces'. For example Hingley separated the Atlantic north and west from the rest of the country while Harding used a division of southern, central/eastern and Atlantic/Argyll in his synthesis of the period (Hingley 1992, Harding 2004a). While these schemes have been subject to later revision and criticism they have informed the debate on Argyll's Iron Age and we now see the region as influenced by a broader Atlantic culture which continues to inform current discussions.

7.4 A Brief Excavation History

In Argyll, including Arran and the Ardnamurchan peninsula, there are over 800 sites currently listed by RCAHMS that are potentially Iron Age. The site types include forts, duns, brochs,

crannogs, enclosures and hut-circles, and while not all of these will prove to be of Iron Age date it does give some idea of the potential for the future study of Iron Age settlement. Of the sites listed under forts, brochs and duns only 45 have had some form of recorded archaeological intervention and a list of these is given in Appendix 1.

While excavations by earlier antiquarians in Argyll produced some important assemblages, the survey and excavation work initiated by David Christison in the late 19th and early 20th century are still arguably one the principal sources that inform the debate on the nature of duns and forts in the area (Christison 1891; Christison, Anderson and Ross 1905). Christison's work and that of earlier antiquarians were however conducted within the parameters of their day, whereby stratigraphic sequences within the monuments were perhaps overlooked or poorly understood. Since then several excavators have added to this picture of Argyll's Iron Age notably, Ludovic Mann, Gordon Childe, John and Dorothy Marshall, Horace Fairhurst, Edgar Peltenberg and Euan Mackie amongst others (Mann; 1906, 1915, 1925, Childe and Thorneycroft 1938; Marshall, J N; 1915, 1934; Marshall, D N: 1964, 1982, Fairhurst 1939; 1956, 1960, 1964; Peltenburg 1982; MacKie 1974). Some exploratory work was undertaken by RCAHMS when compiling the Argyll inventories in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and since then, apart from Henderson and Gilmour's work at Loch Glashan, research excavation on Argyll's Iron Age has been notably lacking and the area was designated a 'black hole' of the period in a research agenda for the British Iron Age (Haselgrove et al. 2001). More recently Investigations on the duns at Barnluasgan and Balure (see Case Study 8: Balure Dun), conducted by Kilmartin Museum were specifically undertaken to try and illuminate the period, while work by Cambridge University on Lismore has also cast important new light on Iron Age settlement in Argyll (Regan and Webb; 2006, 2007; Regan; 2008a, 2009b; Stoddart; 2007, 2008).

These more recent research projects have operated alongside developer-funded archaeology much of this reported in Discovery and Excavation in Scotland and within the subsequent 'grey literature'. These infrastructure and development projects, even on a small scale, have produced some important results concerning the nature of Iron Age settlement in Argyll, such as the projects at Midross, Glenshellach, Dunstaffnage, and Kilninian (Becket 2005; Maguire, Becket and Rennie 2005; Ellis; 2010, 2013). Given the relatively recent date of these excavations, much of the resultant material is still as yet unpublished or unsynthesised although some inferences can be tentatively drawn for the period.

Survey work has also continued to add to the picture of potential Iron Age settlement in Argyll, with the recording of previously unknown hut circles, platforms and even dun structures. Systematic coastal zone assessment surveys have been undertaken by the SCAPE Trust on Coll, Tiree, Colonsay, Oronsay and Islay. Recent walkover surveys conducted by Kilmartin Museum at Carnassarie, Kilbride and Balnahard, Colonsay for example have recorded four unrecorded dun sites and ten potential hut circles (Regan; 2007, 2008b, 2009b, 2012a).

7.4.1 Enclosed sites

The majority of enclosed sites in Argyll comprise structures classified as forts and duns with only 26 classified as enclosures and 6 sites categorised as brochs. The latter grouping is concentrated in the north and west of the area and, including a southerly example on Arran, are all located on the Argyll islands (Figure 90).

Defensive structures in the west of Scotland, particularly Argyll, are often known as dùns, a Gaelic vernacular term that can be used to classify any fortified place, or even a naturally defensive place. The term 'dun' was adopted by RCAHMS and is now used to classify smaller (up to 375m²) thick walled stone enclosures dating from around 500 BC to the early historic period.

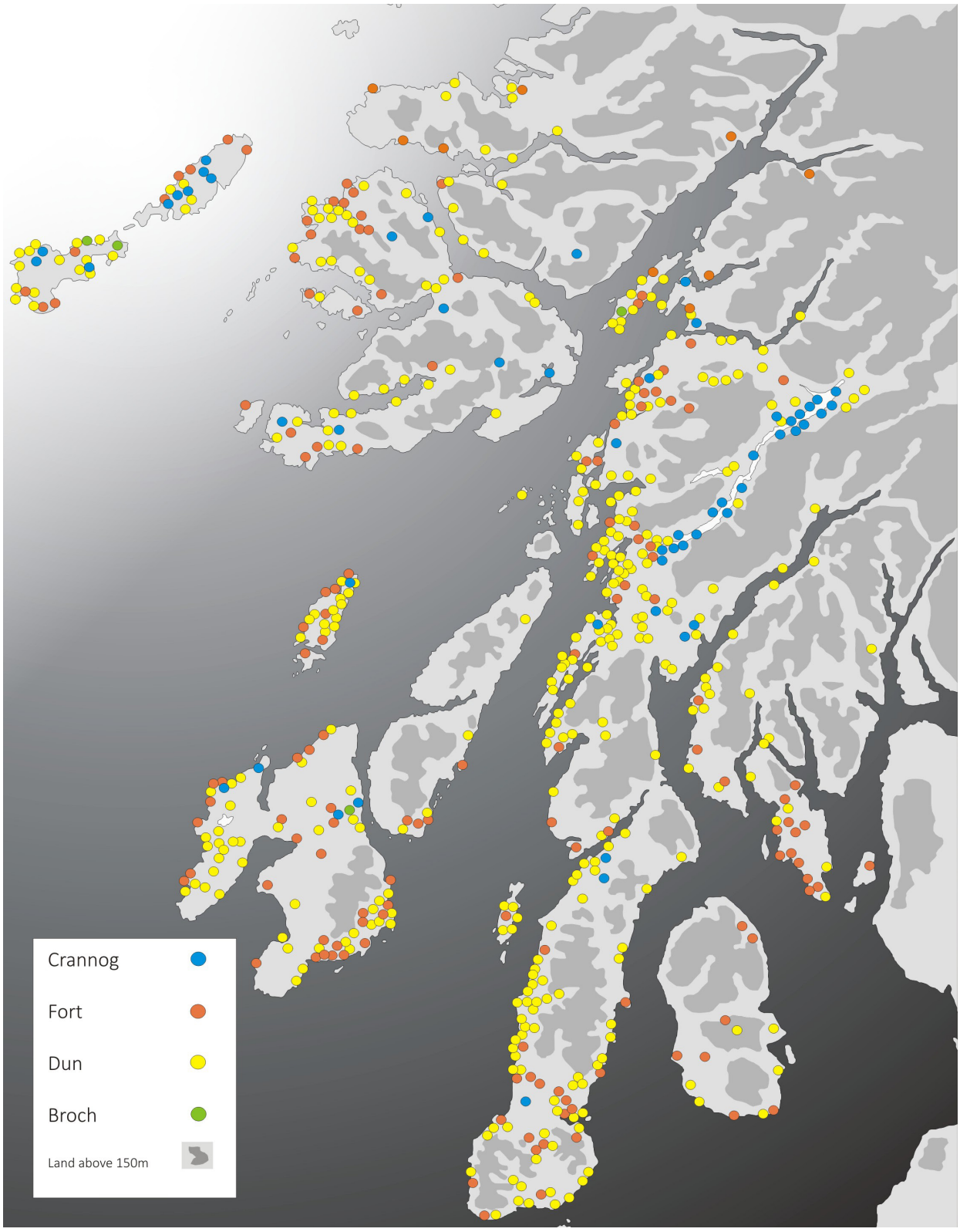

Figure 90: Distribution of forts, duns, brochs and crannogs in Argyll © Kilmartin Museum

Forts by inference are larger in size and could date to an earlier period than duns. As a classification, these at the time necessary groupings, now seem unsatisfactory as duns and forts (and brochs) form a heterogeneous group, varying in size with different structural morphologies

and landscape locations. The function, date and social significance of these structures across Scotland have been much discussed, particularly that of the Atlantic Roundhouse, although this has tended to focus on the broch (and to a lesser degree the wheelhouse) conducted, with a few exceptions, within a decidedly insular framework (Neike 1990; Hingley 1992; Harding 1997, 2004a, Armit; 1991, 2004 Gilmour; 2000, 2005, Parker Pearson et al.; 1996, 1999, Henderson; 2000, 2007 MacKie; 2000, 2007, 2008, 2010). Similarly the chronology and typology of enclosed Iron Age sites in Argyll has been open to debate particularly that between Nieke/Alcock and Harding (Neike 1990; Alcock 2003, Harding; 1997, 2004a).

Henderson and Gilmour have recently summed up the debate and argued that most of the excavated circular sites date to the second half of the 1st millenium BC and while many dun sites have produced artefacts of later date, they also have evidence of earlier but poorly dated occupation or constructional phases such as at Druim an Duin (NMRS No. NR79SE 1) and Ardifuir (NMRS No. NR79NE 2). They argue that few of the excavated sites have reliable 1st millennium AD dates for their construction (Henderson and Gilmour 2011). One of the major factors that influence this debate is the paucity of diagnostic finds from many excavated sites or the absence of securely provenance and dated finds where they are more abundant. The dates attributed to some artefacts, particularly from earlier excavations have also been questioned and are in need of systematic reassessment. With this caveat in mind and until this work is done we still in many cases have to rely on the dates given by the original publications or site reports. All excavation work at these type sites has however added something to the overall picture of Iron Age settlement in Argyll and the following summaries use the original RCAHMS typology of sites for ease of reference.

7.4.2 Forts

In Argyll ten sites classified as forts have undergone some excavation although only three have associated radiocarbon dates: Balloch Hill (NMRS No. NR61NE 8), Eilean an Duin (NMRS No. NM70NE 1) and Dunadd (NMRS No. NR89SW 1). Of these Balloch Hill in Kintyre has the most comprehensive series of dates for Iron Age occupation, suggesting the fort was constructed and occupied between 8th – 1st centuries BC (Peltenburg 1982). At Dunadd a small fort was constructed on the summit of a rock outcrop in the 4th/3rd century BC, although this structure might sit more easily within the dun category of monument, while the fort at Eilean an Duin would appear to have been constructed after the 3rd century BC (Lane and Campbell 1990).

The dating of other forts is based on their recovered finds, often relying on relatively exotic or imported goods. The artefacts from the forts at Dunagoil (NMRS No. NS056SE 4) and Little Dunagoil (NMRS No. NS056SE 14) have recently been re-evaluated and suggest occupation at the former from the late Bronze Age through to the 5th century AD, the later having been occupied from 3rd century BC through until perhaps the Norse period (Harding 2004a). Like Dunagoil, the finds from Dun Cul Bhuirg (NMRS No. NM22SE 3) were examined sometime after the excavation and suggested occupation between 1st century BC – 3rd century AD (Ritchie and Lane 1980). The late 19th century excavations on Dun Mac Sniachan (NMRS No. NM93NW 2) produced Iron Age metalwork dating to the early 1st millennium AD, although how these relate to the complex of structures at the site is less clear (Smith 1875). The recovery of only saddle querns from the vitrified fort of Duntroon (NMRS No. NR89NW 10) suggests this was occupied prior to the introduction of the rotary quern in the 4th – 3rd century BC, although the date of their introduction is still under debate (Christison 1905). Iron Age decorated Hebridean pottery has also been recorded from a number of fort sites in Argyll: Dun Hynish (NMRS No. NL93NE 6), Dun nan Gall (NMRS No. NL94SW 8), Dun Balephetrish (NMRS No. NM04NW 13), all on Tiree and Dun Morbhaidh (NMRS No. NM26SW 12) on Coll. Excavations on the vitrified fort on

Eilean Buidhe (NMRS No. NS07NW 4) along with those on the fort at Creag A' Chaisteal (NMRS No. NM34NE 1) produced no datable artefacts (Maxwell 1941; Smith 1875; Betts 1959, 1964).

7.4.3 Duns

34 sites classified as duns have undergone some degree of excavation and as with forts only a minority of these, four, have associated radiocarbon dates. Kildonan Bay (NMRS No. NR72NE 5) was revisited after its initial excavation specifically to obtain radiocarbon dates, these indicating occupation between the 5th and 8th centuries AD. The dates were reinforced by the few diagnostic finds from the original excavations (Peltenburg and Hood 1979; Peltenburg; Barnetson and Turner 1984). Roman pottery, however, along with what is likely locally produced Iron Age pottery, was also recovered, indicating that the dun, as suggested in the original published report, 'may have been built before the second century AD' (Fairhurst 1939). More recently later 1st millennium BC dates have been obtained from the duns at Loch Glashan (4th – 1st centuries BC, NMRS No. NR99SW 8)), Barnluasgan (dun 4th -1st centuries BC and later enclosure 2nd century BC – 1st century AD, NMRS No. NR79SE 17) (Figure 91) and Balure (2nd century BC – 1st century AD, NMRS No. NR78NE 36), (Henderson and Gilmour 2011; Regan forthcoming) (see Case Study 8: Balure Dun).

Again, as with forts, the dating of other dun



Figure 91: Revetted enclosure wall at Barnluasgan © Kilmartin Museum

sites relies on associated finds derived from the excavation of occupation material. Possibly one of the earliest dates of occupation comes from the vitrified dun at Rahoy (NMRS No. NM65NW 2), this dated to the 4th – 3rd century BC based on the recovery of a looped and socketed iron axe head and part of a La Tene bronze brooch, this relatively early date perhaps underlined by the recovery of saddle querns (Childe and Thorneycroft 1938). A saddle quern was also recovered from the excavation of Clachan Ard (NMRS No. NS05NW 3) on Bute, which might also suggest an occupation date before the 3rd century BC (Marshall 1934). A comb fragment recovered from Dun Scalpsie (NMRS No. NS05NE 4) might indicate a similarly early date if the suggested early Iron Age parallels are proven to be correct (MacCallum; 1959, 1963).

As at Kildonan, the recovery of datable Roman artefacts often proves to be the only diagnostic finds that date Iron Age occupation of dun sites. At Kildalloig, Glenramskill (NMRS No. NR71NW 11) for example, the recovery of a bronze fibula and a spiral ring date the occupation of the site to the 2nd century AD (Bigwood 1964), but the fibula at least was recovered from below external paving that may be secondary or even tertiary and there were numerous secondary internal structures. The Roman pottery, ring headed pin and strap end from Dun An Fhuerian (NMRS No. NM82NW 9) were examined sometime after the initial excavations (Anderson 1895a; Ritchie 1974). The finds derived from a midden below the dun and as such do not directly date the structural remains although they indicate occupation from the 1st – 2nd century AD to the middle of the 1st millennium AD. Roman pottery has also been recovered from Ardifuir and Dun Fhinn (NMRS No. NR63SE 10) which suggests a date of construction prior to the 2nd century AD (Christison 1905, Bigwood 1964), and at Ardifuir may relate to secondary occupation.

The excavation at Dun Fhinn also produced a glass toggle bead and similar beads have also been recovered from the Dun at Ronachan Bay (NMRS No. NR75SW 7) and the fort at Dunagoil (Peltenburg 1979; Harding 2004b). More recently beads have been recovered from the dun at Balure (see Balure Dun: A Case Study) (Figure 92) and from an unenclosed settlement site at Kilninian (NMRS No. NM34NE 35) on Mull, both of these sites returning 2nd – 1st century BC dates (Regan forthcoming; Ellis pers. comm.). The resultant research on these beads and others recovered from other parts of Scotland, the Isle of Man and Ireland has shown that the beads are of localised manufacture re-using imported Roman glass.

A ring headed pin recovered from Dun Beag Vaul (NMRS No. NM04NW 4) perhaps suggests a date



Figure 92: Glass toggle beads, the two uppermost from Balure Dun and the lower bead from Dun Fhinn © Kilmartin Museum. The uppermost bead measures 10mm in length.

before the 4th century AD as does the recovery of decorated insular Hebridean pottery (MacKie 1963b). Decorated pottery has been recovered from excavations on Dun Nighean (NMRS No. NL94SE 1) and Dun na Cleite (NMRS No. NL93NE 5) on Tiree, while finds of similar decorated pottery have been recovered from An Dunan (NMRS No. NM04NE 9) and Dun Beag (NMRS No. NM04NE 3), also on Tiree, along with Dun Beic (NMRS No. NM15NE 5) and Dun An Achaidh (NMRS No.NM15SE 5), both on Coll (Piggott 1954; Holley; 1994a and b, 1996a and b). The recovery of undecorated pottery from Dunan Nan Nighean (NMRS No. NR49NW 5) on Colonsay led Piggott to suggest an occupation date of 'the last century BC or early centuries AD' (Piggott 1951). Small quantities of undecorated pottery have also been recovered from Leccamore South (NMRS No. NM171SE 2), Kildalloig (NMRS No. NR7NW 11), An Caisteal (NMRS No. NM32SE 2), Dun Mhic Choigil (NMRS No. NR63SE 21) and Balure (MacNaughton; 1891, 1893; Bigwood 1964; Fairhurst 1964; Hedges and Hedges 1977; Regan forthcoming) (see Balure Dun: A Case Study). The duns at An Caisteal and Leccamore also produced rotary querns which have also been recovered from a number of other sites such as Druim an Duin(NMRS No. NR79SE 1), Dun Chroisprig (NMRS No. NR26SW 5) and An Dun (NMRS No. NM92NW 3) and suggest occupation after their introduction sometime in the later half of the 1st millennium BC; but their use is a long one and without further dating evidence can not firmly place any of these sites in the Iron Age (McArthur 1873; Christison 1905; Newall 1966; Betts 1969). The excavation on Dunan Breac (NMRS No. NR85NE 17) produced iron slag and a few stone objects but no datable artefacts while that at Suidhe Chennaidh (NMRS No. NN02SW 1) produced only bones and charcoal (Graham 1915; Christison 1891). Similarly, excavations at Eilean Bhuide (NMRS No. NS07NW 04) along with smaller evaluations at Laganrure (NMRS No. NR78NE 38) and Castle Dounie (NMRS No. NR79SE 13) failed to produce readily datable artefacts (Balfour 1910; Maxwell 1941; Regan; 2006, 2011).

The recovered artefacts from the dun at Ugadale Bay (NMRS No NR72NE 9) indicate occupation of the site from the 8th century AD and perhaps sporadically into the late medieval period, although as the excavator pointed out the investigations were limited in nature and produced no firm dates for the actual construction of the dun (Fairhurst 1956). Similarly, the early historic artefacts recovered from Dunollie (NMRS No. NM83SE 11) and Eilean Righ I (NMRS No. NM80SW 5) along with the medieval finds from MacEwans Castle (NMRS No. NR97NW 1) while indicating occupation in those periods, may not necessarily date the primary construction or occupation of these structures (Alcock 1978; Brown and Cowie 1987; Marshall 1982).

7.4.4 Brochs

Brochs in the strict definition if the term espoused by Mackie (e.g. 2007) are relatively rare in Argyll and absent from the mainland. The excavated example of Dun Mor Vaul (NMRS No. NM04NW 3) on Tiree has resulted in much discussion as to its dating and pottery sequence (MacKie 1997), which has informed the debate on the pottery from other sites. It is now perhaps generally accepted that the radiocarbon dates from the broch are too problematic to support the excavators contention that it was constructed in the middle of the 1st century BC (Harding 1997). Occupation appears to have continued until the middle of the 3rd century AD. The site however has an earlier Iron Age phase dating perhaps as early as the 5th century BC (Mackie; 1963b, 1974, 1997).

Decorated Hebridean pottery has also been recovered from Dun Mor A' Chaolais (NMRS No. NM04NE 1), Dun Boraige Mor (NMRS No. NL94NW 1) and Dun Nighean (NMRS No. NL94SE 1) all on Tiree, ceramics from the latter two studied by Piggott (Beveridge 1903; Piggot 1952). More recently work has also been undertaken at Tirefour broch (NMRS No. NM84SE 1) on Lismore with the results awaiting publication (Stoddart; 2007, 2008).

7.4.5 Enclosures

The term enclosure is a broad one, encompassing earthworks and crop marks as well as stone built enclosures that, apart from the thickness of their walls, could be classified as duns or forts. The recently excavated example at Barnluasgan is just such an example, where the walls of the later 'enclosure' proved to be no thicker than the underlying dun (Regan and Webb; 2006, 2007). Apart from the enclosure at Barnluasgan, which was occupied between the 2nd century BC – 1st century AD and might anyway sit more comfortably in the dun category, few of these sites have been dated or indeed excavated and while they might belong to the Iron Age could equally belong to other periods.

7.4.6 Enclosed Settlement Sites

The recently uncovered settlement sites at Midross (NMRS Nos. NS38NE 71 and NS38NE 72) near Loch Lomond have been putatively dated to the Iron Age, including a roundhouse site and what may be a pallisaded enclosure ditch containing up to seven timber roundhouses (Becket 2005). The superimposed timber roundhouses at Ardnadam (NMRS No. NS17NE 7) are also likely of Iron Age date and the published report postulated that the dyke that surrounded the site was also constructed in this period (Rennie 1984).

7.4.7 Unenclosed Settlement Sites

The most obvious remains of potential Iron Age settlement outside of enclosures are hut-circles and platform sites. The majority of hut-circles comprise a single circular or sub-circular wall ring, which can be constructed from earth or stone or more likely a mixture of both. The RCAHMS in its compilation of the Argyll inventories noted that many hut circles were likely associated with relic field systems such as those recorded at Druim Mór (NMRS No. NR38NE 13) on Oronsay, which were defined by a series of earthen dykes (RCAHMS 1984). The few hut circles that have been excavated show that these structures originate in the 2nd millennium BC and can continue in use until the 1st millennium BC (Stevenson 1984; Ritchie 1997). However, it does seem highly probable that some hut circles belong to a later period and recently what is probably Iron Age pottery was recovered from the evaluation of two hut circles at Beinn Bheag (NMRS No. NR49NW 56) on Colonsay, although these sites await radiocarbon dating (Regan 2012b).

Less easy or impossible to discern as earthworks are the remains of timber post built roundhouses, which may originally have had upstanding remains, these subsequently the victim of later agriculture or settlement activity. The remains of two roundhouses were excavated on Tiree in the early 20th century at Corniag and Balevullin (NMRS No. NL94NE 6) (Beveridge 1903; Mann 1906; MacKie 1963a). Other Iron Age roundhouses have been uncovered at Ardnadam (12m- 12.5m dia.) and Bruach an Druimein (7.5m-10m dia., NMRS No. NR89NW 11), the later dating to the 4th – 1st centuries BC (Rennie 1984, Abernethy 2008). Recently a large early Iron Age roundhouse structure (14m dia.) was uncovered at Glennshellach and another roundhouse structure (9m dia.) was excavated at Midross (CANMORE ID 281530) (Ellis pers. comm.; Maguire, Becket and Rennie 2005). What seems increasingly likely to be a roundhouse platform has been partially excavated at Carnassarie, producing pottery and midden deposits dating to the 4th – 2nd centuries BC (Ellis 2008). Groups of roundhouses have also recently been excavated at Dunbeg and Glennshellach, mainly dating from the middle Bronze Age although one dates to the early Iron Age and these will significantly add to our understanding of this type of structure in Argyll (see also Case Study 4: Dunbeg and Glenshellach and Ellis 2013). The roundhouses at Bruach an Druimein, Ardnadam and Glennshellach are located in areas that also have evidence of occupation from other periods perhaps hinting at settlement continuity. This also appears to be the case at the sites at Ardnave (NMRS No. NR27SE 22), Achnasavil (NMRS No. NR73NE 9), Killellen (NMRS No. NR27SE 3) and Kilninian which also have evidence of Iron Age occupation amongst that of other periods (Ritchie and

Welfare 1984; Siggins and Carter 1994; Ritchie 2005, Ellis pers. comm.).

7.4.8 Crannogs and island dwellings

51 crannogs have been identified in the Argyll area, although few have been subject to excavation, the notable exception being the crannog at Loch Glashan (NMRS No. NR99SW 1) where radiocarbon dates and recovered artefacts indicate that the site was occupied between the 5th century AD, at the end of our period, to the 9th century AD (Crone and Campbell 2006). However, it has been postulated that the majority of crannogs were likely constructed between the 9th century BC – 2nd century AD (Crone 1993, Henderson 2007). Radiocarbon dates suggestive of Iron Age occupation or construction have been obtained from two other crannog sites in Argyll; a 4th – 2nd century BC date was obtained from a wooden pile at Loch Ederline (NMRS No. NM80SE 18), while a similar 4th – 1st century BC date was obtained from Eilean Ban (NMRS No. NM44NE 1) in Loch Frisa (NMRS No on Mull (Cavers and Henderson 2005; Holley 1994c). At Lochan Dughaill (NMRS No. NR75NE 5) crannog, recovery of a cannel-coal bracelet, a perforated stone disc, and a small clay crucible from the brief excavation undertaken in 1890 likely indicate that this was occupied in the Iron Age period although the site was reused in the medieval period (Munro 1893). A rotary quern was recovered from a crannog at Loch Quien (NMRS No. NS05NE 12) although this only suggests occupation of that site after the 3rd century BC (Cavers 2003). A small excavation at a crannog in Loch A' Bhaillidh (NMRS No. NR76SE 5), South Knapdale, uncovered charcoal and ash deposits along with some bone but produced no other artefactual evidence (Munro 1893). The concentration of over 20 crannogs along Loch Awe, with its relative paucity of nearby land based duns undoubtedly warrants further study as does whether other small natural islands were utilised for habitation at this time. A relatively unexplored but perhaps important area is that of marine crannogs such as An Dòirlinn, Eriska (NMRS No. NM94SW 7) which was partially excavated in 1884, although apart from some animal bones no other diagnostic material was recovered (Munro 1885).

7.4.9 Caves, Rock Shelters and Burial

Several cave sites in the region have produced evidence of occupation or use in the Iron Age. At Dunagoil (NMRS No. NS056SE 11) midden deposits within the cave below the vitrified fort were excavated in 1913, the recovered artefacts suggesting a similar date of use as the fort (Mann 1915; Marshall 1915). Evidence of Iron Age occupation was also uncovered within two rock shelters on Inchmarnock (NMRS No NS05NW 35 and NS05NW 42), the primary occupation deposits dating to the 4th century BC (Lowe 2008). The discovery of decorated pottery, probably dating to the Iron Age, was reported from a small cave near Dun Hynish on Tiree with pottery also reported from caves at Ardmore (NMRS No and Allt Dubhaig (NMRS No. NM34NE 7) (Beveridge 1903; Coles 1958; Mithen, Pirie and Smith 2006). An intact early Iron Age pot from Uamh Ur (NMRS No NR39NE 9) on Colonsay is unusual and possibly significant, although the exact nature of its recovery remain unclear, although this cave system also contained what appear to be several occupation deposits (Symington Grieve 1880). Recovered artefacts from Keil Cave (NMRS No NR60NE 3), which was excavated between 1933 and 1935, suggest occupation in the 4th century AD and after (Ritchie 1967). A fragment of Samian, along with artefacts from later periods, was excavated from the St Columba's cave near Ellary (NMRS No NR77NE 10) (Campbell 1959, 1962, 1973; Campbell and Young 1973). Given their ubiquity across Argyll and its islands it would be surprising if other caves and rock shelters were not used in the Iron Age period.

The remains of several inhumations were recovered from the excavation of MacArther Cave, Oban (NMRS No NM83SE 9) in the late 19th century and were subsequently dated to between the 5th – 3rd centuries BC (Anderson 1895b; Saville and Hallen 1994), these being rare examples of Iron Age Burial in Scotland. Recently excavations at Dunstaffnage (NMRS No

NM83SE 2) uncovered an infant inhumation in a cobble built cist, associated with an irregular row of fire-pits and a cobble pathway. The pits have been interpreted as funerary pyres located along the edge of wet ground and radiocarbon dates suggest use in the late Iron Age (C. Ellis pers. comm.).

7.5 Future Work in Argyll: Illuminating a Black Hole

As mentioned above Argyll has previously been described as being a black hole in terms of modern archaeological research (Haselgrove et al. 2001). Future work on the Iron Age in Argyll should incorporate many of the Scotland-wide research recommendations recently outlined by Scottish Archaeological Research Framework (ScARF 2012).

7.5.1 Excavation

What seems self evident is that, apart from a few stray finds, the vast bulk of evidence we have for Argyll's Iron Age comes from excavation whether antiquarian, later research or commercial projects. As a field archaeologist it probably comes as no surprise that I would argue that it is equally self evident that if we wish to add to the picture and attempt to address some of the ScARF research recommendations, more excavation work needs to be undertaken.

Sample excavation of previously unexcavated sites would provide a means of obtaining a primary-stage analysis of the Iron Age settlement sequence in Argyll, essentially evaluating the existing resource of which less than seven percent has had some sort of archaeological investigation. From this basis potentially informative sites could be targeted for more extensive excavation, employing the wide-ranging analytical techniques available to the modern excavator. Another and perhaps less intrusive method of enhancing the existing database would involve the reopening of trenches from previous excavated sites which could potentially date internal sequences and give chronological context to previously recovered artefacts; Appendix 2 suggests some sites that would warrant further investigation.

It is clear from the results of rescue and commercial archaeology that there potentially remains a large 'invisible' settlement component in the Iron Age, as perhaps in other periods, which has now to be considered when trying to model any demographic and settlement patterns. The recent excavation of several groups of timber roundhouses originating in both the traditionally demarcated Bronze Age and Iron Age periods in Argyll, may give us important insights into the possible chronological relationships between the development and use of the roundhouse and the building of forts, brochs and duns. However, more of the latter need to be investigated with the hope that more of the former come to light. A key area to develop is the means to predict, prospect and discover these previously invisible aspects of Argyll's Iron Age.

The apparent lack of artefactual material within many excavated Iron Age sites is likely due to the lack of survival of specific types of artefact particularly organic material. Further investigation of crannogs and wetland sites in Argyll as elsewhere has the potential to give a more complete understanding of material culture in this period as well as shedding much needed light on environmental profiles and natural resource exploitation.

7.5.2 Landscape Survey and Environmental Research

Site specific excavation will need to be accompanied by more intensive survey of areas surrounding them; indeed it could perhaps be argued that survey work should always precede any excavation. The incorporation of landscape and waterscape analysis, representing the need to understand the influence of the sea and freshwater bodies as a central part of travel, trade and the contemporary experience of living in Argyll, should accompany such survey work. This might also give us better insights

into the continuity of settlement and perhaps shed light on the nature and chronology of boat nausts, enclosures and field systems and their relationship to potential Iron Age structures. Of course identifying Iron Age land use patterns surrounding any specific Iron Age habitation site is fraught with problems given that the available agricultural land in Argyll, as elsewhere in the Highlands, is physically constrained by geography and thus limited within the same parcels of land reworked over time. Identifying regional relic land-use patterns overtime would be very profitable and targeting smaller land units for intensive survey and excavation might enable chronological landscape profiles to be established.

Recent study of the late prehistoric environment in Glen Add suggested a relatively stable environment in this locale up to 650 BC. Thereafter, if Argyll followed patterns seen in Ireland, it may be that the area suffered from climate deterioration in the form of increased rainfall. Increased storminess may have had an impact on sea-going travel. If this was the case then any such deterioration may have led to the loss of marginal land previously exploited for crops and grazing, with increasingly boggy ground on the glen floors compounded by the loss of higher cultivable land. The extent of the local population is of course unknown but even with a relatively stable or slightly growing population such a loss of land would have led to increased pressure on the control of land tenure. The environmental evidence for this period however is local and patchy for example in some places in Argyll there appears to be a loss of tree cover around c.500 cal BC this perhaps increasing towards the BC-AD boundary. To this extent it is crucial that we have better modelling of climate change in this period for Argyll along with a better understanding of potential effects of sea level change.

7.5.3 Re-assessment of older material

As elsewhere in Scotland, Argyll has informative Iron Age assemblages from several sites that in many cases lack chronological definition. Most of these come from excavations and, as recently suggested by Alexander among others, would warrant re-examination providing a dating framework whereby the existing archival and artefactual material could be re-interpreted and synthesised using scientific techniques not available to the original excavators (Alexander 2012).

The recent analysis of glass toggle beads mentioned above show how current scientific techniques can shed light on the origin and manufacture certain artefacts, while accompanying study of their distribution show a distinct bias in western Scotland the Isle of Man and Ireland, perhaps indicating intra regional contact in the late pre-Roman Iron Age.

Within Argyll there appears to be regional or sub regional differences in certain aspects of material culture present in the Iron Age. This is perhaps most obviously noticeable with the presence/absence of decorated Hebridean or insular pottery, this difference is perhaps reflected in the apparent absence of broch and wheelhouse architecture in the southern Hebrides and mainland Argyll.

Plain pottery however does occur and these assemblages need to be studied to see if any typologies or other details in construction, use and deposition can be teased out. Other artefact groups equally require modern re-evaluation and synthesis.

New research work along with information that will undoubtedly continue to be produced by commercial archaeology will allow broader regional patterns to be discerned across Argyll in the Iron Age, whereby the region can be better compared to more exhaustively studied regions in Scotland and elsewhere.

7.6 Key Research Themes

- Assess and better understand the transitionary period between the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age periods in terms of

environmental, socio-economical and political changes.

- Identify and understand the chronology, development and relationship of timber roundhouses and crannogs to the stone built fort, dun and broch structures.

- Collect a more comprehensive series of absolute dates for potential Iron Age features and their associated artefacts.

- Investigate Iron Age structures relative to their surrounding landscapes and crucially, waterscapes.

- Understand the environmental context of Argyll's Iron Age and identify environmental changes over the period (see Section 4.8) .

- Reassess artefact assemblages from earlier excavations.

- Identify any regional or sub-regional cultural patterns within Argyll and between Argyll and other regions.

- Understand the processes that led to the continuity of use and/or reoccupation of certain sites into the Early Medieval period and the discontinuation of others.

- Discover the remains of, and interpret, identifiable practices to better understand death in Iron Age Argyll.

7.7 Bibliography

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