

# DEFINING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESOURCE ON THE ISLE OF HARRIS

An assessment of the impact of environmental factors and topography on the identification of buried remains

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*The modern itch after the knowledge of foreign places is so prevalent that the generality of mankind bestow little thought or time upon the place of their nativity. It is become customary in those of quality to travel young into foreign countries, whilst they are absolute strangers at home.* (Martin Martin, 1707 - in Monro, D [ed] 2002: 2)

## Abstract

Recognition of the richness and diversity of Scottish coastal archaeology has been one of the most important developments in the study of the archaeology of Scotland during recent times. The Isle of Harris, however, has been left behind. Perhaps due to its lack of upstanding archaeological monuments, or because of its harsh terrain – steep mountains, secluded valleys and deep machair (blown sand) dunes – little research has been undertaken to characterise the archaeological resource of the island and how this might be integrated into the wider trends of past human activity in the Western Isles. This paper introduces some of the preliminary results from a long-standing archaeological research project on Harris and offers a new insight into the archaeological and cultural resource of this island. The unique geological, topographical and geomorphological characteristics will be outlined and explored, with particular reference to how these factors have impacted upon the recognition of buried archaeological remains. The results from key sites will be summarised and the importance of this new dataset within local and regional studies of the development and history of the Western Isles archipelago outlined. Key themes within the discipline of island archaeology will be discussed, focusing upon the reaffirmation of the need to understand fully the cultural and archaeological development of each individual island before expanding into inter-island studies.

## Keywords

Western Isles, Scotland, archaeology, new discoveries, culture

## Introduction

Investigation into the richness and diversity of Scottish coastal archaeology has been one of the most important developments in the study of the archaeology of Scotland during recent times. Against the ever growing backdrop of island archaeology as a specialist subject and the call to re-brand island studies as the archaeology of the sea (Rainbird, 2007), there is a need to further understand the archaeological resource that the islands on the Atlantic coastline of Scotland can offer and, perhaps more importantly, to assess why certain locations have been intensely investigated whilst others have been virtually ignored. This paper introduces some of the preliminary results from a long-standing archaeological research project on the Isle of Harris and offers a new insight into the archaeological and cultural resource of this island. The unique geological, topographical and geomorphological characteristics of Harris will be outlined and explored, with particular reference to how these factors influenced not only past populations, but also how they have impacted upon the recognition and recording of buried archaeological remains. The results from key sites will be summarised and the importance of this new dataset within local and regional studies of the development and history of the Western Isles archipelago outlined. Key themes within the discipline of island archaeology will be discussed, focusing upon the reaffirmation of the need to understand fully the cultural and archaeological development of each individual island before expanding into inter-island studies.

## Catalyst for study

The Western Isles has attracted sporadic attention throughout the modern era, with many archaeologists, historians, and scholars alike becoming drawn into the microcosm of potential investigative scenarios that these isolated laboratories appeared to offer. Indeed, this was recognised as early as the late 17th Century when Martin Martin, an author and historian from Skye, became convinced of the need for a first hand account of the society, culture, and history of the Western Isles (Monro, 2002). Over the next three hundred years each individual island was seen as an isolated laboratory, where the archaeological resource could be excavated, catalogued, and characterised in seemingly blissful unawareness of the complexity of the archaeology of the archipelago as a whole. Early work, such as the investigations by Erskine Beveridge (1903 and 1911) and MacGregor (1949) understandably focused on the impressive upstanding remains that are visible on many of the Hebridean Islands (such as forts, standing stones and brochs). Recent work has begun to move towards a more unified study of the west coast looking not only at the more visual monuments, but also incorporating historic landscape characterisation, geomorphology, sea level change and palaeo-environmental archaeology to study historic landscapes and the interaction between communities and the place where they live (Mills et al, 2004; Parker Pearson et al, 2004; Bell, 2007).

The Isle of Harris, however, has been left behind. Perhaps due to its lack of visible upstanding remains, or because of its harsh and variable terrain – steep mountains, secluded valleys and deep machair dunes – little research has been undertaken to characterise and interpret the archaeological resource of the island and how this might be integrated into the wider trends of past human activity in the Western Isles. With evidence of Mesolithic occupation indicating that Harris has had human habitation for approximately 9000 years (Simpson et al, 2005), close to 90% of the past history of

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Harris occurred prior to written records. Therefore, archaeology is the key to unraveling the significance of material remains contained within its landscape.

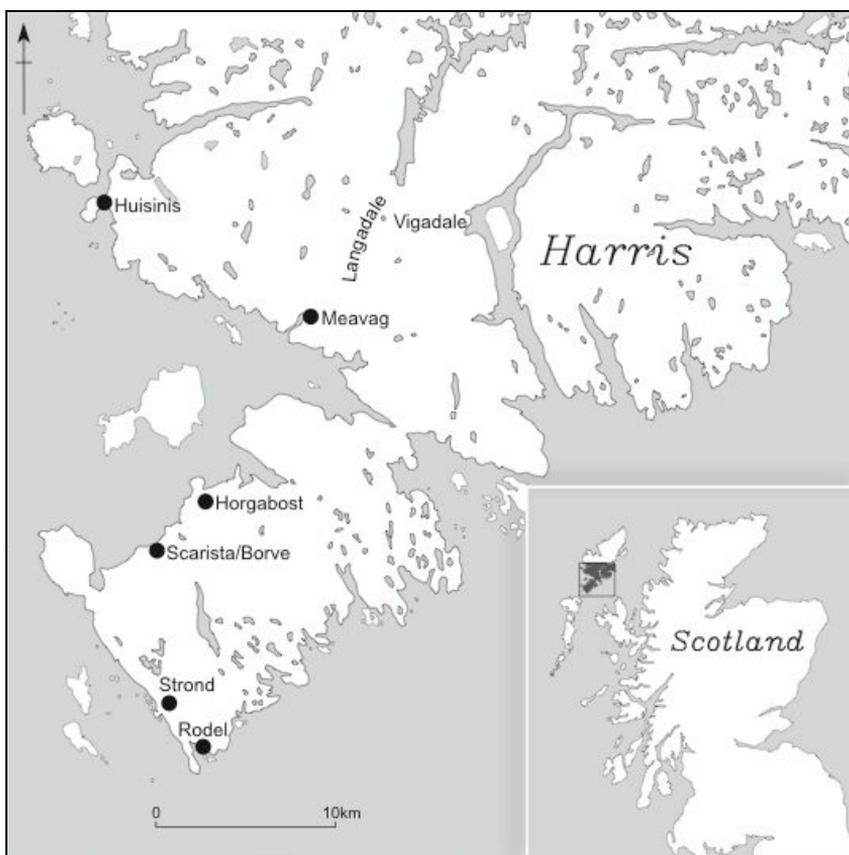


Figure 1 – Location map showing the Isle of Harris and key sites discussed in the text

As with the majority of the Scottish coastline, erosion across Harris represents a very significant issue. Intensive survey and reconnaissance work by Historic Scotland over the past decade has identified some 12,000 sites along the Scottish coast vulnerable to coastal erosion (Dawson, 2003), with many more under threat from human activities. Although this total includes sites from several of the Western Isles, for example South Uist (Moore and Wilson, 2005) and Barra (Branigan and Grattan, 1998), no intensive or systematic coastal erosion survey had been completed on Harris. Within the current climate of concern over global warming, the rise in sea levels and the increased interest in marine resources (Wickham-Jones and Dawson, 2006) and tourism, it is of the utmost importance to assess and record these threatened coastal archaeological sites so that, where appropriate, suitable mitigation procedures can be initiated.

There are other, perhaps even more significant, issues that act as a catalyst for further study of the archaeology of Harris, and indeed the other Scottish Isles. These issues are

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all linked to the passage of time – in particular the losses of traditions, both oral and in practice, such as small-scale, family orientated fishing or the use of sheiling (small cottage) settlements, which were a way of life for the occupants of Harris for many centuries. Although such activities have either ceased or been modernised, the ‘old’ ways are still remembered, passed down from one generation to the next and often now only survive in oral tradition. As such, it is important that as part of further research on Harris, this reminiscence evidence is also collated and used in conjunction with the record of archaeological sites.

### **The Harris enigma**

Harris lies towards the northern end of the Western Isles, an archipelago of approximately 500 islands off the west coast of Scotland covering 2900km<sup>2</sup> (Fettes et al, 1992). Although not an island in its own right, Harris, with adjoining Lewis, forms the largest island of the chain (Figure 1). However the geological, topographical and geomorphological distinctiveness of Harris compared to the other Western Isles islands, including Lewis, requires it to be examined as a unique entity. Although it is recognised that isolationist studies of islands should now be questioned (especially within archipelagos), it is our intention in this paper to highlight the need for a firm understanding of the chronological history, archaeological resource and cultural identity of individual islands before assessing inter-island relationships, trade, and archaeological /cultural cross-development.

The geological and topographical features coupled with the climatic history of Harris have greatly influenced the types of settlement and agricultural systems that can be developed there. As a consequence, anthropogenic changes, including cultivation, deforestation, grazing, peat cutting and quarrying, have played a significant role in forming the present landscape (Williams, 2006). The same geological and topographical features that make the Harris environment unique, both past and present, also severely impacts the identification and study of buried remains by archaeologists.

### **Geology, geomorphology and topography**

The instantly recognisable difference between the Isle of Harris, the adjoining Lewis and the other Western Isles islands is the topography. Steep hills and valleys dominate the Harris landscape with a larger area being 400m above sea level than the rest of the Western Isles put together (Figure 2, Plates 1 and 2). The extreme topography is no doubt one of the primary reasons why the Isle has been less intensively studied than its flatter, less harsh neighbours. Heedle described Harris “as the most barren part of the British Isles” (1878: 546). The geology of the Western Isles is dominated by the Lewisian Gneiss Complex. This comprises a series of Pre-Cambrian, metamorphic rocks, which are some of the oldest in Britain, having been formed from igneous rocks approximately 2,900 million years ago (Collins, 1986; Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, 2002; Fettes et al, 1992; Stewart, 2001). However, the geology of Harris, more specifically of South Harris, is more complex than its neighbors (Goodenough and Merritt, 2007). Bands of younger rock formations, including granite and gabbro form the upper solid geology (Figure 5).



Figure 2 – Map showing approximate land 400m above sea level across the Western Isles

Three key geomorphological characteristics of the Harris landscape, combining past and present, must also be understood before attempting to identify and assess the

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buried archaeological resource. These are peat deposits, machair formation and sea level change. These characteristics are equally as important when studying the other Western Isles islands, although perhaps to varying degrees.

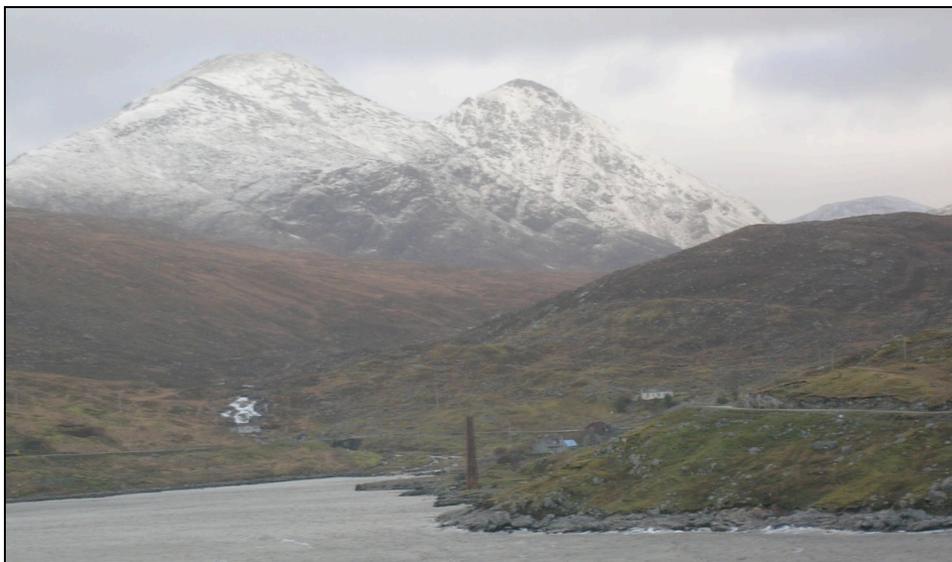


Figure 3 – The Hills of North Harris (authors' photograph)

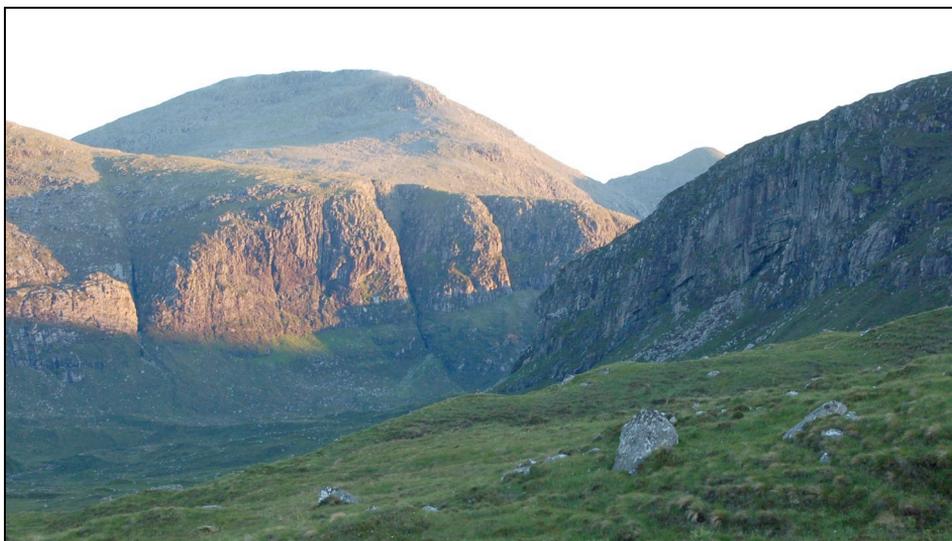


Figure 4 – Harris's topography is characterised by steep hills and secluded valleys (authors' photograph)

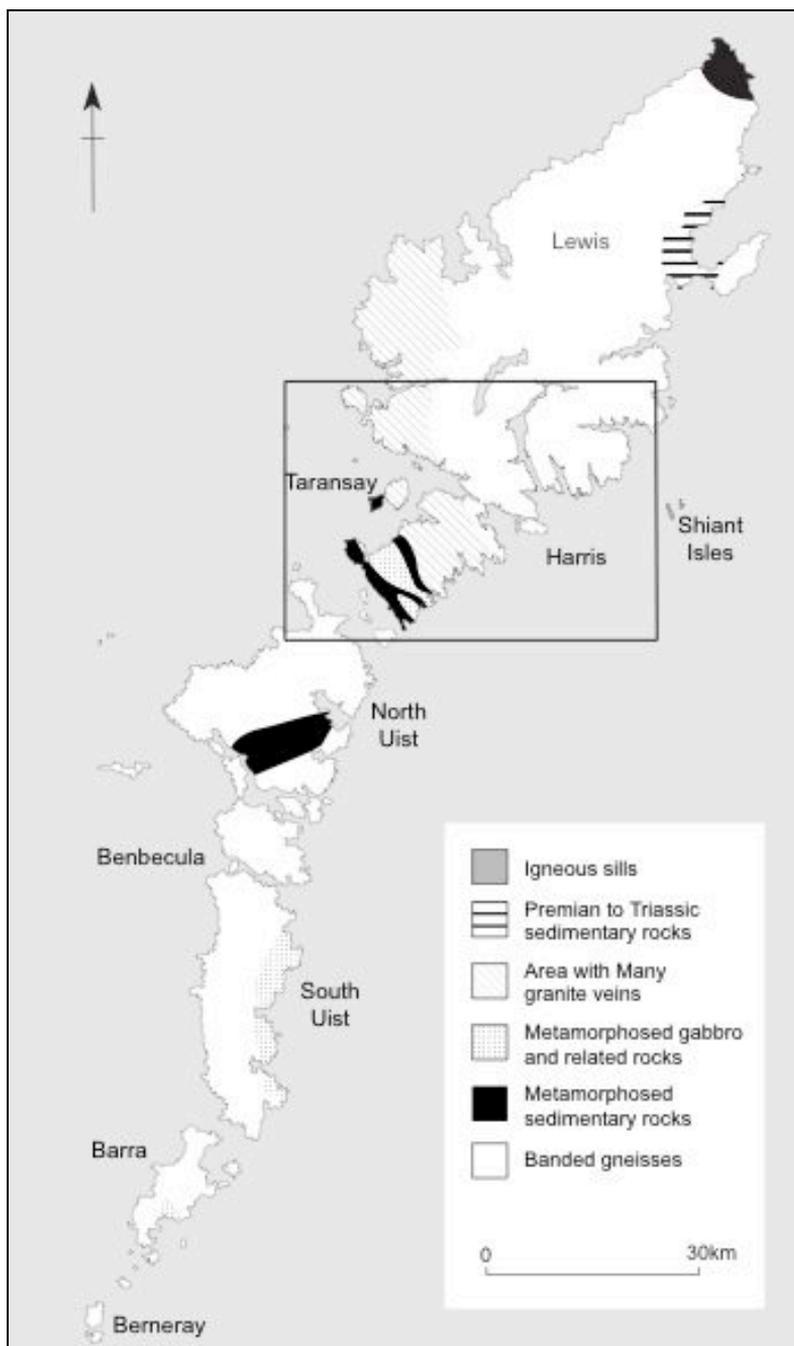


Figure 5 – Geological map of the Western Isles

Predominant in the uplands and mountains of Harris, blanket peat has buried much of the prehistoric landscape. There is little visible on the present surface. Following the

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Postglacial climatic optimum, conditions gave rise to the emergence of blanket peat, although the period during which the climatic peat developed is not entirely understood for the Western Isles. The soils left behind by the retreating glaciers were low in nutrients, although they were capable of supporting the growth of woodland during the early to mid-Holocene (c10,000-5,000 BP), with birch being established first, followed by hazel, pine, oak, elm and alder (Fossitt, 1996). Woodland clearance and controlled regeneration almost certainly took place in the Western Isles during the Neolithic and Bronze Age (Carter et al, 2005; Evans, 1971; Parker Pearson et al, 2004a and b). This early woodland management preceded agricultural activity. In addition, climate change was bringing cooler and wetter weather. This resulted in anaerobic ground conditions that inhibited decomposition, thus resulting in peat formation with an estimated growth rate of 1 inch (2.5 cm) every 60 years (Church, 2005: Figure 6). By the end of the Bronze Age, the peat coverage of the Western Isles was probably as extensive as it is today. On much of the peatlands across Harris, a depth of between 0.3 and 1.2m is present and conceals the earlier landscape features and archaeological sites, a highly significant hindrance to the search for archaeological remains.



Figure 6 – Substantial peat deposits exist across Harris concealing archaeological deposits beneath several metres of material (authors' photograph)

Along the west coast of Harris, blown sand (commonly referred to machair) has had a similar obscuring effect, but has the advantage of being dynamic rather than static, thus it has the ability to erode and uncover as well as conceal. The Gaelic word machair is the only name for this major habitat type in Britain and refers to flat, low lying calcareous sand plains formed by dry and wet short-turf grasslands above impermeable bedrock, a habitat termed 'machair grassland' (Figure 7). This term can be expanded to include the mobile and semi-fixed fore-dunes, dune slacks, fens, swamps, lochs, saltmarsh, and

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sand blanketing adjacent hill slopes, together forming the 'machair system' (UK Biodiversity Group, 1999). Rising sea levels throughout the Holocene controlled the onshore movements of vast quantities of sediment from the extensive and shallow coastal shelf, which in turn formed the machair dune system (Wickham-Jones and Dawson, 2006; Figure 7). The absence of machair sand from deposits underlying the earliest known site on Harris (Mesolithic middens at Taobh a Tuath) suggests this site predates machair formation (Simpson, 1965), as do the earlier Neolithic settlements at the Udal, North Uist (Evans, 1971: 52, 62).



Figure 7 – The machair dune system and grassland at Horgabost, South Harris (authors' photograph)

The third key contributing factor to the recognition of archaeological remains is sea level change. Although the processes and factors associated with Holocene sea level rise for the Western Isles are extremely complex, recent work by Jordan (2004) and Wickham-Jones and Dawson (2006), has begun to address this issue and build on earlier work by Richie (1979 and 1985). These recent studies have highlighted the impact of sea level change on the archaeological resource. Figure 9 depicts the probable Western Isles landmass at the start of the Holocene compared to the present coastline (Wickham-Jones and Dawson, 2006).

Figure 9 clearly demonstrates that large areas along the western coastlines of Barra, the Uists and Harris have been submerged. This highlights two key points. Firstly we must assume that a significant number of archaeological sites are likely to now be under water. Jordan (2004) has outlined that mid-late Holocene sea level change (based on sites on Harris and Lewis) can be summarised into two major 'events' between 5500+/-60 years BP and 4500+/-100 years BP and between 3000+/-80 years BP and 820+/-50 years BP. With the west coast of Harris being predominantly fertile machair plain, this highlights the likelihood that many of the coastal settlement sites of the Mesolithic onwards may now be submerged. Recent work in Wales and along the west coast of England by Bell (2007) has not only highlighted the importance and typology of

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immersed Mesolithic coastal settlement sites but also the problems associated with their study. Secondly, caution is required when interpreting the archaeological sites that are identified on both mainland Harris and on the numerous small satellite islands. It seems likely that any archaeological sites identified at these locations (particularly on mainland Harris) were not situated on the coast when they were occupied.



Figure 8 – Eroding machair sand dunes at Horgabost revealing evidence of past occupation in the form of substantial shell middens (authors' photograph)

### The Western Isles: summary of the archaeological endeavours

As suggested, the previous liaisons between archaeological study and the Isle of Harris have been sporadic at best. It is perhaps more useful to discuss this topic in relation to the main archaeological research projects at the other locations in the Western Isles. Early work was concentrated on the islands of Uist (Beveridge, 1911; Thomas, 1870 and 1890) and Barra (Young, 1955), although passing references to sites on Harris were made – for example Captain Thomas, during an archaeological survey of the Hebrides in the late 19th Century, was the first to use the term 'beehive' sheiling to describe a site in North Harris (MacKenzie, 1904). In 1914, the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS, 1928) compiled a basic dataset of archaeological sites in the Hebrides, although this was primarily based on visible

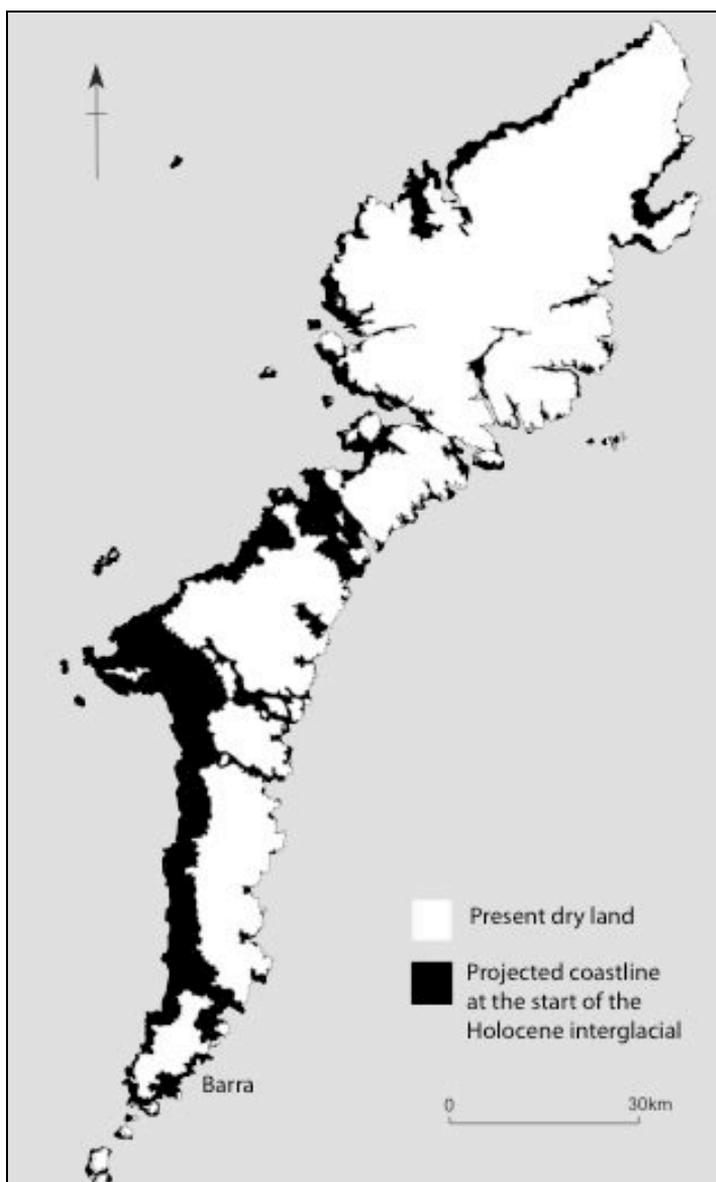


Figure 9 – Illustration outlining the projected Mesolithic coastline for the Western Isles at the start of Holocene Interglacial (based on Wickham-Jones and Dawson, 2006)

monuments like churches, standing stones and broch (hollow walled structures). This not only created a heavy bias towards the periods represented by these remains but also the apparent lack of visible archaeology shifted archaeological fieldwork away from

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Harris (Armit, 1996). No systematic walkover took place during the RCAHMS survey of Harris (or indeed subsequently) until the programme of research described in this article.

For the same reasons as the antiquarians chose other islands to study, so did several major United Kingdom institutions. The University of Sheffield, working on the Uists (Parker Pearson, 2004a; Parker Pearson et al, 1999) and Barra (Branigan, 2004) has coordinated one of the longest running programmes of archaeological investigations in Scotland. Additionally, Lewis has been the subject of a long-standing fieldwork projects conducted by University of Edinburgh including rescue excavations of multi-period settlement sites at on the Valtos peninsula (Harding and Gilmour, 2000) and the Late Iron Age sites at Cnip (Armit, 1994 and 2006; Harding and Dixon, 2000). The West Lewis Landscape Project and excavations at Callanish standing stones have been conducted by Historic Scotland (Ashmore, 1995). Further intensive study has been undertaken at Bornish on South Uist by Sharples (2005), at the Udal, on North Uist by Crawford (1986; Crawford and Switsur, 1977) and Baile Sear (SCAPE) and at Bosta in Lewis (Cunningham and Hothersall, 1992). As with the antiquarian studies, Harris was overlooked.

One site on Harris that is an exception to the rule in having been the subject of archaeological investigation is Taobh a Tuath (or Toe Head) at Northton, South Harris. This prehistoric site of international importance was identified in 1964 by Professor J. McEwan (Aberdeen University) and subsequently excavated by Professor Derek Simpson (Leicester University). The research project demonstrated a multi-period site consisting of impressive prehistoric structures and assemblages ranging from the Mesolithic (radiocarbon dating of midden deposits c7060-6650), through the Neolithic (3000BC) and Beaker period (2090-1890 BC), into the Iron Age and beyond (Simpson et al 2005). Indeed, the site has produced some of the best-preserved evidence for structures associated with Beaker settlement in Western Europe. However, Northton is by no means fully understood. No further work has been carried out on the site and, with the long delay in publishing the results of the 1965 excavation (Simpson et al, 2005), new archaeological prospection techniques, palaeo-environmental archaeology and our knowledge of prehistoric sites in the Western Isles, have moved on considerably.

### **The Harris Survey Project: assessing the unknown resource**

Over recent years, a number of archaeological field investigations have been undertaken as part of the Harris Survey Project. At its conception, the project aimed to further enhance the archaeological record by identifying and recording visible, upstanding features and to assess the potential for buried remains to exist. Furthermore, with the concealing nature of geomorphological and topographical characteristics, it was proposed that several non-intrusive geophysical techniques would be tested in an attempt to identify the most successful. To date, a substantial dataset has been created including the identification of several important archaeological sites that are of regional and possibly international importance. Analysis of this information now suggests not only a redefinition of archaeological field strategy on Harris itself, but also a review of the archaeology of the Western Isles as a whole.

### Methodology

An archaeological research strategy was initiated to provide the basis for study. As outlined, the topography of Harris varies between mountains, machair, peat uplands and zones of fertile land. Transects of different terrain types were selected to allow detailed study on the premise that this would provide a valid sample for the island as a whole (Figure 5). Transects through Vigadale and Langadale assessed the mountainous peat upland areas in north Harris whilst a series of transects at Horgabost, Scarista and Huisinis investigated the coastal zone and machair dune systems of West Harris. Further detailed investigation of the fertile machair plains and peat backlands were undertaken at Rodel and Strond as well as a coastal survey of maritime archaeology of the island of Scalpay. In all areas, the initial work was carried out predominantly by systematic walking of the landscape (reconnaissance survey) following guidelines for field survey established by the Royal Commission on the Historic Monuments of England (RCHME, 1999).

Any unusual, anomalous or manmade features were identified. These included boundaries and earthworks, building foundations of stone or turf, former cultivation and field systems, or unusual vegetation or topographic features. Each was individually recorded, photographed and located using the Global Positioning System (GPS). All the information was then stored in a Geographical Information System (GIS) where it could be viewed and analysed in relation to other sites and landscape features as well as submitted to the Western Isles Sites and Monuments Record (SMR). A number of sites were subsequently targeted for detailed study, encompassing enhanced recording and illustration, comprehensive topographic and detail surveying, geophysical surveying as well as keyhole and open area excavation. The selection of these sites was based on several key criteria, as follows:

- the site was deemed as particularly important due to the type or preservation of the archaeological remains;
- the geology, topography and vegetation were suitable to test the success of non-intrusive geophysical techniques;
- the site was under immediate threat from environmental and anthropogenic factors such as wind, tidal or livestock erosion;
- the site was complex in nature, resulting in the need for detailed recording to be undertaken to enhance our understanding of chronological development of the remains;
- the site was suitable for training and outreach purposes.

Although numerous sites were selected for detailed investigation, many more sites that fell into the above categories were identified, and more detailed fieldwork is required.

### Beginning to redress the balance

The programme of field walking and monument recognition identified over 900 sites to add to the SMR for the Western Isles. New sites were recorded across all transects;

these clearly demonstrate the wealth of the archaeological resource within each of the geomorphological regions of Harris. On a broad scale, the majority of the sites date to the late 18th/19th Century, which in itself forms an important data-set that allows us to attempt to interpret the complex present landscape of the island and, more importantly,

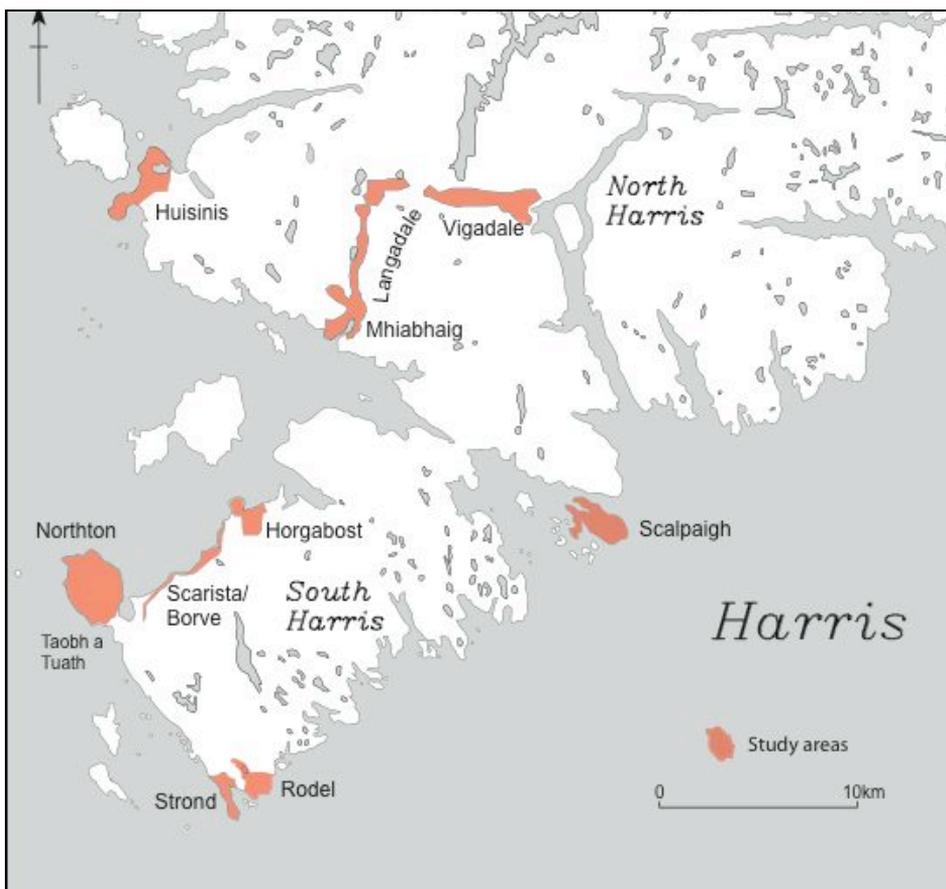


Figure 10 – Targetted study areas that provide a cross-section of the different geological, geomorphological and topographic landforms across the island

how it evolved. Many of these features are not recorded elsewhere, even cartographically. Prehistoric land divisions were identifiable at several locations (for example Meavag [Figure 11] and Rodel [Figure 13]), despite the imposition of later field boundaries and cultivation systems. The dense concentration of archaeological sites recorded on the shores of the tidal loch at Meavag, North Harris (Figure 12) facilitated detailed landscape characterisation assessment in line with an on-going Historic Land-use Assessment Project by the RCAHMS (2006). Results of this assessment reveal a complex sequence of land-use with evidence of possible prehistoric boundaries, pre-clearance structures, cultivation and field systems, and post-clearance land-use and settlement. The investigation also identified important archaeological remains defining

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the post-medieval fishing industry of the area, including slipways, quaysides and jetties. These remains, mostly only visible at low tide, are remarkably well-preserved and provide an important insight into the exploitation of the marine resource in this period. For example, excavation at one such site identified a kelp-drying kiln (Figure 14), the first of its type found on Harris, despite the fact that the kelp industry thrived on the Isle throughout the 18th Century (OSA, 59f). Detailed landscape characterisation can contribute significantly to our understanding of how modern landscapes have evolved and help to inform land management and conservation strategies that help protect the archaeological resource (Dyson-Bruce et al, 1999).



Figure 11 – Remains of a probable prehistoric boundary division at Meavag (authors' photograph)

### Rubh' an Taigh, Huisinis

One site of potential importance was identified at Rubh' an Taigh (meaning 'Point of the House' in Gaelic), Huisinis (Figure 8). Identified during field survey, the site consisted of a number of stone walls and structures protruding from the upper surface of the machair. One structure, being cellular or 'figure of eight' shaped in plan (Figure 15), is of great interest as it bears close resemblance to similar pre-Viking (late Iron Age) houses excavated at Udal, in Uist (Crawford, 1986), Bosta in Lewis (Armit, 1996) and on Orkney (eg Ritchie, 1977). Detailed recording and keyhole excavations were completed to define further the nature, date and function of the site. The selection for further study was not only due to the site's potential importance but also due to its proximity to the level of high tide and damage already sustained by wind erosion. The results suggest an extensive archaeological site with two main phases of activity. The dune on which the site is situated appears to consist of organic rich midden material containing undiagnostic body sherds dating to the Iron Age. Sealing the midden deposit was a thin

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deposit of sand suggesting a period of inactivity followed by several phases of construction forming the cellular structure. Evidence for other walls and possible structures were identified protruding from the machair to the north of the excavation area suggesting the possible presence of a substantial settlement site.

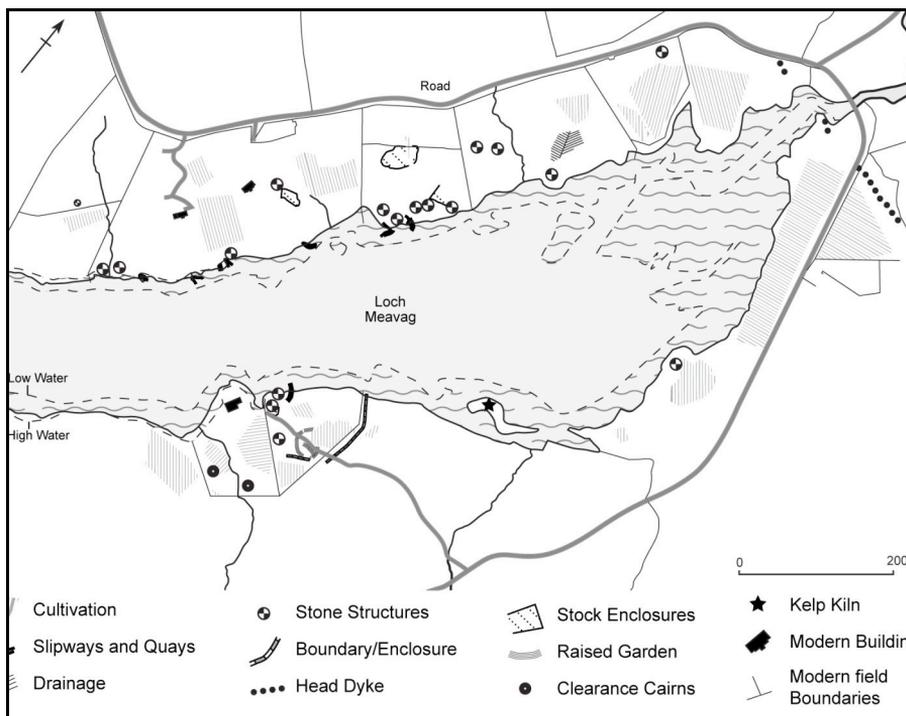


Figure 12 – Historic landscape assessment of Loch Meavag. A wide diversity of archaeological remains exist within the study area

### Borvemore standing stone

A series of non-destructive archaeological techniques were employed to further understand and record the site of the standing stone at Borvemore, Scarista (Clach Steineagaidh). The visible Neolithic standing stone is all that remains of a putative stone circle that is located within an area of intense archaeological activity. Geophysical analysis, comprising resistance survey and Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR), complemented detailed topographic analysis to produce clear evidence demonstrating the probable form of the stone circle. The presence of a geophysical anomaly surrounding the stone circle may increase the importance of this intriguing site. The anomaly, identified due to the low resistance properties of the constituent material, most probably represents the location of a ditch that has silted up over time (Figure 7), resulting in the need to reclassify this site to a henge monument (Figure 8).

The Late Neolithic is seen by many as a time of divergence, with many cultural traditions amongst the Western and the Northern Isles of Scotland following the same patterns,

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for example monumental architecture and Grooved Ware pottery (Ashmore, 1996; Rainbird, 2007). However, it is still widely held that the construction of henge monuments bypassed the Western Isles (Parker Pearson, 2004b). The hard and durable form of the Lewisian Gneiss Complex is indeed a very good reason to theorise that no henge monuments exist in the Western Isles. The probability that such a monument now exists on Harris suggests this premise now needs to be revised. This hypothesis is further strengthened by the probable identification of a second such monument submerged off the coastline of the Strond region of South Harris (Figure 17).

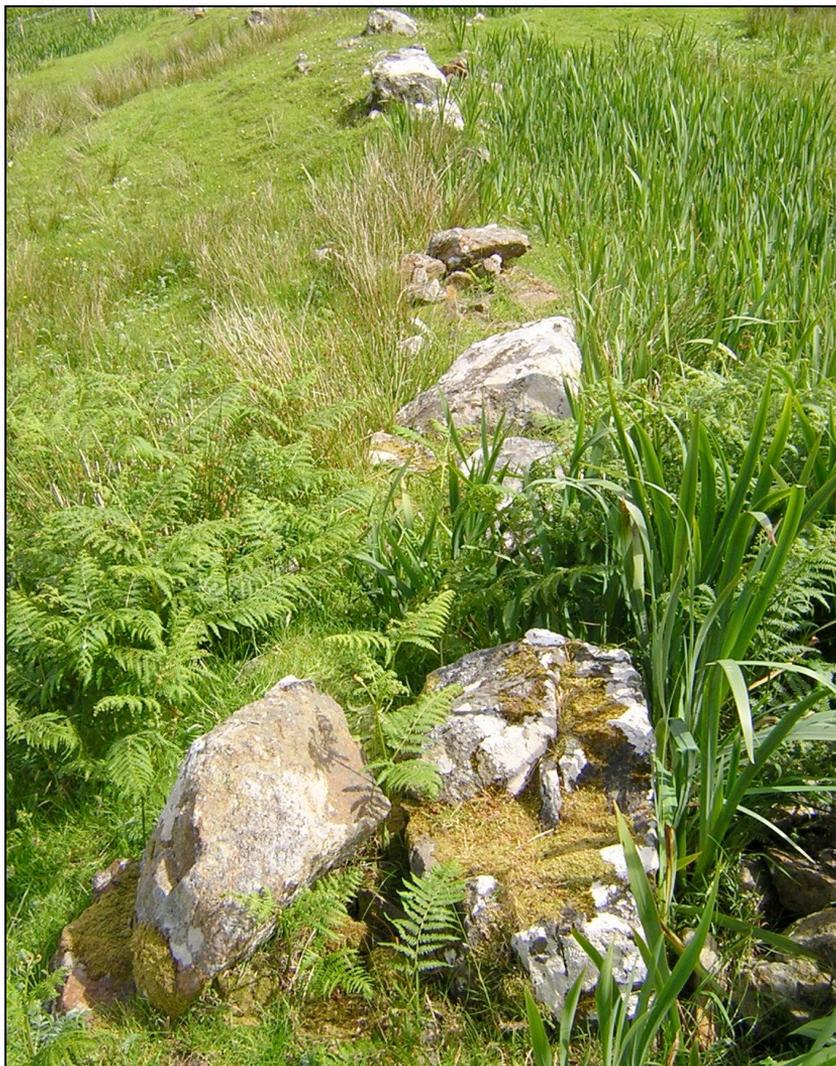


Figure 13 – Remains of a probable prehistoric boundary at Rodel, South Harris (authors' photograph)

**Conclusion: society, culture and island archaeology**

Although the Harris Project is still active, the preliminary results demonstrate that important archaeological remains do survive below the present ground surface. There can also be no doubt that environmental factors have affected, and are still affecting, these archaeological remains. As Binford (1980) remarks “the greater the redundancy, the greater the potential buildup of archaeological remains, and hence the greater the archaeological visibility” (1980: 9). The accumulation of material such as peat and machair, and the affects of dynamic and semi-dynamic processes upon these deposits, create a scenario that contradicts the above statement. The sedentary settlement sites, even as recent as the medieval period, may be inundated and not visible from surface level. In addition, earlier sites may have already been submerged beneath the sea. However, with the growth and development of non-intrusive geophysical surveying and its successful application here, Harris is beginning to receive the archaeological credibility it deserves. Perhaps more importantly this new evidence not only has a clear impact on the chronological and historical overview of the Western Isles but, in light of the successful techniques applied to locate buried archaeological remains, perhaps also provides further impetus for programmes of work to be applied more widely across all islands within the archipelago to further our understanding of site typology and distribution patterns.



Figure 14 – Excavation of a kelp kiln on the banks of Loch Meavag (authors’ photograph)

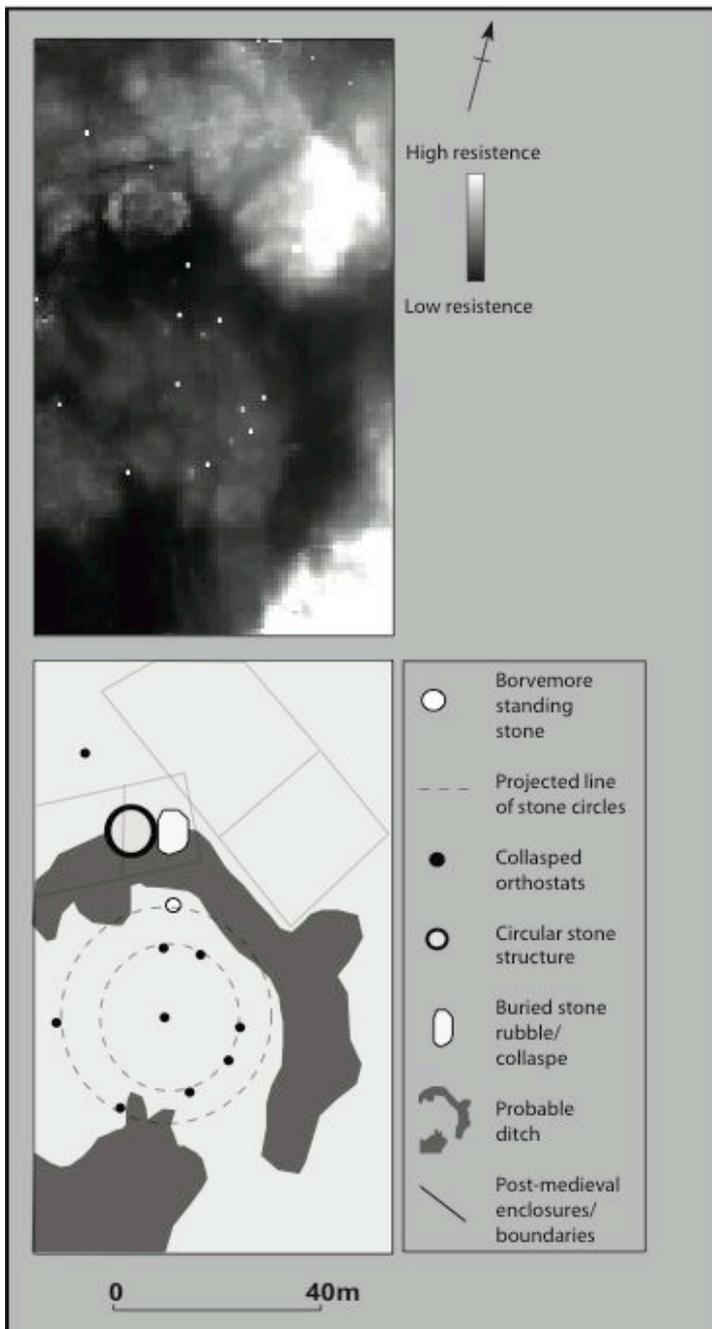


Figure 15 – Results (top) and interpretation plot (bottom) of the geophysical survey around the Borvemore standing stone. The results provide some clarity on the form of the stone circle and the presence of a surrounding ditch [forming a possible henge monument].

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Figure 16 – Remains of an Iron Age cellular structure eroding from the machair at Rubh'an Taigh, Huinish, North Harris (authors' photograph)



Figure 17 – Aerial photograph of the coastline at Strond, South Harris, showing the presence of a probable henge monument submerged beneath the sea (authors' photograph)



Figure 18 – Excavation identified a high level of preservation of the stone walls and floor of the Iron Age cellular structure at Rubh'an Taigh, Huinish, North Harris (authors' photograph)

It is of course logical to theorise that as the Western Isles were once all once connected and formed one land mass, any study of the Mesolithic environment and settlement patterns must combine the Mesolithic archaeological resources of each island into a

single research entity. However, problems can begin to arise if this methodology is applied to the Neolithic period or later. As the rising sea levels spilt the Western Isles into individual units, the development and evolution of individual island populations would be specific – each reacting to individual environmental factors and landscape characteristics, especially on Harris with its unique combination of geological and topographical features. This of course is not to dismiss the role of inter-island contact and trade, and inter-island cultural development, all of which are highly important factors in the studies of coastal archaeology (Broodbank, 2001; Daire, 2009; Kirch, 2007 and Rainbird, 2007), but to stress the fact that chronological development and cultural evolution may not necessarily be the same across all the islands.

The key theme throughout this research is that of perception. Early antiquarian researchers and modern scholars have believed that fewer archaeological monuments, features and deposits are present on the Isle of Harris compared to others in the Western Isles (Beveridge, 1903 and 1911; Robinson, 2007) but this is a perception based purely on physical visibility. Lack of visible remains does not preclude archaeological survival below ground; nor should any upstanding remains be labeled as more important or significant simply because they are more easily seen. This project has identified that a range of archaeological sites, some of national or international importance, lie within Harris. Questions arise, therefore, as to their *invisibility* in relation to sites and monuments on other adjacent islands where peat and machair cover is also pronounced, and where land use and landscape histories are also similar.

Is this perhaps an issue of earlier land ownership and management of which we have no record? Is this perhaps a product of the clearances in the mid 19th Century that may have been uniquely catastrophic in the removal of stonework on Harris? That said, the two *Statistical Accounts* make little mention of antiquities; this suggests that any erosion or removal of monuments must have occurred before the late 18th Century. On the other hand, is it a reflection of more longstanding social attitudes peculiar to Harris, perhaps centuries old? This would do much to reinforce the argument for cultural separation and the importance of individual island study. Whatever the reason, it has undoubtedly underpinned the slowness by which Harris' archaeology has become properly recognised, and has hindered the preservation of sites. One wonders whether the collapsed stone circle at Borvemore would be better preserved had it been located on North Uist or on an adjacent hill to the Callanish stone circle in Lewis? In comparison to Harris, in the Uists and Barra, modern (ie 20th and 21st Century) interest in the past and its value as a resource for research, tourism, education and community involvement is well advanced. This is now being partly matched by the work of the Harris Archaeology Group (supported by this project), comprising of professional and amateur archaeologists. It undertakes a wide range of tasks exploring the archaeology of Harris and in forging links between the local communities, archaeologists and schools.

Much has been written on the historical and cultural development of the Western Isles before all the islands within this archipelago have been fully studied. The analogy which this points to is the scenario whereby scholars, archaeologists and historians alike are theorizing and critiquing the picture shown on a jigsaw puzzle which is still only half complete. A reassessment of the archaeological resources on the islands of the Scottish Atlantic seaboard may help to fill in a few more pieces of this puzzle.

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