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“The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their proper name.”

— Confucius

Abstract

It has long been observed that there were many archaeological sites situated upon promontories around the coasts of the UK, Ireland and Western Europe, enclosed by walls or banks and ditches that looked defensive. These have been termed “Promontory Forts”. It has also long been noted that whilst some of these sites clearly are defensive, many are clearly not (Lamb 1980; Hingley 1992; Burgess 1997; Cunliffe 2001; Harding 2004; Sharples 2006). Archaeological excavations on the Isle of Lewis by the author and others has uncovered a series promontory sites which were clearly not defensive but are not yet properly understood. Field walking by the author has also revealed many other promontory sites in Lewis which do not make sense as defensive sites. Taken together this raises the distinct possibility that there is more than one kind of archaeological site situated upon promontories. Despite this, CANMORE, the national HER records for Scotland, list “promontory fort” as the only option for sites situated upon promontories – and it is much the same in the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland¹. There are 42² of these listed in Lewis and Harris, and 198 in Scotland (accessed 29/11/2021). Ongoing research makes use of such records, so this inaccuracy completely precludes our proper understanding of these sites. In order to better understand the sites and explore the complexities of the situation, this study embarks upon a holistic inquiry into the class of site known as “promontory fort”, beginning by looking at the definitions we depend upon. Then, a review of promontory sites in the UK was undertaken, and this is followed by a detailed description and discussion of the Lewis sites which prompted the inquiry. The information generated is then used to argue for a new taxonomy of promontory sites; based upon the evidence presented, various uses of such sites can be discerned – including sacred spaces, trading spaces, annual gathering places, agricultural spaces - as well as those which clearly *are* defensive spaces, or forts. However we argue that even those that clearly are forts often have other, older uses which linger on in their significance, showing these categories are not exclusive and could be multiple and layered.

¹ In the Republic of Ireland you can choose between an inland or a coastal promontory fort. With the addition of “Cliff Castle”, an even more loaded term, the same is true for England, and in Wales & Northern Ireland the system is less proscriptive but “Promontory Fort” is the only term that will return results. Accessed 30/09/21.

² Searched by the zoomable map as not all promontory forts in Lewis actually have Lewis in their tag, resulting in some being missed out if a keyword search of “promontory fort”, “Lewis” is used. Accessed 29/11/2021

Introduction and context of inquiry

This study was prompted by the results of a series of archaeological excavations on the Isle of Lewis, by the author and others, and in addition by extensive field walking, which has made it clear that many promontory sites on the island are not defensive. Because of the restrictive interpretation imposed by the blanket use of the term “promontory fort”, this causes a crisis in understanding – if they are not forts, what are they? Are these non-defensive sites unique to Lewis or are there other non-defensive promontory sites around the country?

Chapter 1: A discussion of definitions

1.1 What is a Promontory?

We must deepen our inquiry by analysing our basic definitions. What is a Promontory? This is not actually as clear cut as it might at first sound – the contortions and complications some coast lines go through can make it abundantly clear that all terms are generalisations encompassing many varied forms.

For example, if a Headland or Peninsula is bigger than a promontory, where do you draw the line? And what is a tiny promontory – is it a stack? Certainly, on the Isle of Lewis there are sites with the place-name “Stac” which are joined to the land even at high tide: Stac Domhnuill Chaim, and Stac a’Chaisteal (Mchardy 2009 17 & 22 respectively). These grey areas are not restricted to promontories and stacks: for example, what is the difference between a Stac and a rock, sticking out of the water, or Sgeir/Skerry in Gaelic? Or between a Skerry and a small island? In Lewis we also find Eilean Luchraban, or Pygmies Isle, which is a promontory, and Stacaiseal, which is a hill in the middle of the island.

The online etymology dictionary tells us that “promontory” comes from

“high point of land or rock projecting into the sea beyond the line of a coast,” 1540s, from French promontoire (15c.) and directly from Medieval Latin promontorium, altered (by influence of Latin mons “mount, hill”) from Latin promunturium “mountain ridge, headland,” which is probably related to prominere “jut out” (see prominent). Related: Promontorial; promontorious.”³

³ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/promontory> accessed 01/11/2021

A promontory is defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary⁴ as

“a narrow area of high land that sticks out into the sea”

This is subtly different to a Headland – ***“a piece of land that sticks out from the coast into the sea”*** and a Peninsula – ***“a long piece of land that sticks out from a larger area of land into the sea or into a lake”***⁵. The wording indicates that these three are successively bigger features, and that promontories, the smallest, are usually precipitous.

How then do we differentiate between Promontory and Stack? Even where initially the difference is clear, a site upon a promontory might well end up being on a Stack before it disappears into the sea. We must remember that there are sites which did specifically start out upon a stack, and those which specifically started out upon a promontory which became a stack.

The Cambridge dictionary has sea stack as ***“a tall piece of rock sticking out of the sea near the coast, formed by the action of the waves against the rock on the coast”***.

A practical definition of a stack is offered on the UK climbing website: ***“an isolated pinnacle of rock entirely surrounded by the sea at high tide... If its top has a larger diameter than its height, then it is an island - or a low rock... a stack should be at least 30 feet high. Below that it is a rock. A stack need not be a perpendicular tower. However a stack should be rocky on all sides and involve scrambling at the very least to get to the top”***.

(Mellor 2002, 2).

So not joined to the land, and therefore easy to distinguish from a promontory. This is the common English understanding of the word.

Chris Burgess, who conducted the study of promontory enclosures in Lewis discussed above (Burgess 1999) made a distinction between sites upon:

Promontories where a narrow neck of land extends from the shore and occasionally widens out, in which there is a barrier across the narrowest point,

Headlands that narrow beyond the point of barrier which is the widest point,

Stacks which may be linked or separated to the shore, are barred at the obvious point of access and may have walls surrounding their perimeter.

While the addition of subtlety to our language could be a good thing, Burgess’s distinction between headland and promontory could be queried. This is not a common usage today and it is difficult to imagine anyone in prehistory making similar distinctions, and Burgess himself found no correlation between types of sites and these supposedly contrasting places (Burgess 1999 103). His definition of stack would follow Lewis Gaelic usage.

The respected Gaelic dictionary Dwellys defines Stac without any mention of water or sea, as: “1. Precipice, steep, high cliff or hill; 2. projecting rock; 3. Conical hill...” (Dwelly, E. 1901 896). We can surmise that the definition of these categories in Gaelic usage is different to that seen in English.

⁴ (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/peninsula?topic=promontories-and-peninsulas> accessed 26/10/21)

⁵ The prefixes of these last two are cognate - “Pen” being Welsh for “Head” - revealing a shared anthropomorphic origin - there is a Gaelic equivalent in Ceann Tir/ Kintyre / Head land although this usually refers to larger pieces of land.

Interestingly, there is a huge variety of Gaelic names for promontory in Dwelly's – 24 in all, including Tobh, Rubha, Ros, Sron, Maol, Rinn, Cean, Aird, Stac (Dwelly's online Gaelic dictionary, accessed 30/10/21) illustrating the fact that there are many different shapes and sizes of what we have only three English words for: promontory, peninsula, and headland.

This illustrates a very important point – we are assuming that all promontories are similar, in a way because it is our only word for them, or one of only three words, when in reality there is a vast array of different shapes and sizes of the thing that we call promontory. Consider the example of promontories on low lying coastlines that are not craggy, or craggy but with sheltered harbours.

This point is explicitly discussed in Lamb (1980), Barker and Driver (2013) and Sharpe (1992) and linked to the interpretation of sites, yet does not seem to have been fully appreciated elsewhere.

As Dennis Harding points out about the 1st century BC Venetic strongholds in Brittany, which are described as promontory forts:

Caesar's description of Venetic strongholds plainly refers to lower-lying tongues of land, which might be approached on foot when the tide was out, or evacuated by ship when the defenders were hard pressed. This hardly fits the craggy and sheer-sided cliff-castles of Brittany or the coastal promontory forts of Atlantic Britain and Ireland, as has long been recognised (Hogg, 1972: 22). ... So to suppose a direct derivation of the promontory forts of Atlantic Scotland, even of those particularly distinguished by the use of multivallation (Lamb, 1980: 62), is hardly warranted.

Harding 2004 144

Then there are so called "inland promontory forts" – a Hillfort positioned on a spur or shoulder of hill. These would clearly not adhere to any of the above definitions of a promontory, as these all include the Sea. What evidence is there that these inland forts should be grouped together with coastal promontory forts?

Without wishing to enter the lively debate about the nature of Hillforts, one of the least controversial things that could be said about them is that they are thought to be central places, often situated by road ways through the landscape:

"Hillforts form some of the largest archaeological monuments in Europe and are recognized as regional centres of power and authority of the late prehistoric era. ... In some cases, their placement in the landscape may be linked with natural route-ways and/or natural resources, representing an ever-increasing need to control trade networks and the procurement, exploitation and supply of natural resources"

(O'Driscoll 2017 506)

However, coastal promontory forts are generally peripheral to domestic settlement and agriculture (e.g. Lamb 1980, Harding 2004 289, Cunliffe 2001 363). They may have been visible seamarks but often they have no easy access to the sea, the main form of coastal travel.

It is argued here that although there are certainly some similarities and connections between the two, coastal promontory forts are not simply a subclass of hillfort, as has been commonly

assumed. This conflation is still current in the UK – for example, in the recent “The Atlas of Hillforts”, Lock & Ralston categorised many coastal promontory sites in Lewis as “Hillforts”, even including the low lying island Dun Bharclin (Canmore Id : 4234 NGR: NB 39451 23272) – see figure 11 below – which, if proper attention was paid to landform, would not qualify as promontory fort or hillfort (Lock and Ralston 2019, accessed 20/10/21).



Figure 11: Dun Bharclin, a low lying (<5m OD) island of the east coast of Lewis, categorised as a Hillfort in the “Atlas of Hillforts” (Lock & Ralston 2019). This is an island even at the lowest of tides. Image: Canmore

People chose to build upon certain land forms for certain reason and we should be aware of the subtleties involved in this choice and not lump all promontories – or indeed islands, promontories and hilltops – in together. This might be our way in to start to properly categorising these sites; to finding the proper names for them. Whilst not wishing to be overly deterministic, different promontory morphologies – when combined with other factors - led to different uses.

It seems possible then that our catch all term “promontory” is constraining the interpretation of these monuments. There are many different kinds of promontory, and we should perhaps have more nuanced terms if we are to properly understand the sites upon them.

However, the Cambridge definition of promontory (and Headland/Peninsula) and stack will be assumed for the purposes of this study, although we should note the caveats that these definitions will include a massive variety of coastal landforms and that they are not necessarily how things were named in the past, or indeed the present in Gaelic culture.

1.2 What is a Fort?

The Cambridge English dictionary defines “Fort” as

“a military building designed to be defended from attack, consisting of an area surrounded by a strong wall, in which soldiers are based”⁶

Whilst in some instances this is clearly the case, sometimes enclosing walls are not specifically to do with defence. As a contributor to the “Atlas of Hillforts” says, “walls and ditches might also have meaning as symbols of power, or could have functioned as social or ritual borders” (Posluschny, A.G. 2019:206).

The nature of hillforts in the UK is a hotly debated topic, with some arguing that they were not primarily really about defending soldiers and were more about social status and social cohesion, trade, conspicuous consumption (O’Driscoll 2017). So how do we tell the difference between a defensive wall and a wall designed to enhance status and power? Or between a symbol of power and a ritual border? These subtleties might in some instances be beyond what it is possible to ascertain through survey and excavation, but they are non-the-less fundamental to the interpretation of sites which are enclosed.

Another fundamental aspect that *is* available to study is the physical location and how naturally defensive it is.

This discussion gets right to the heart of the problem – how many of the so called promontory forts really are forts? We shall return to this question.

1.3 What is a promontory fort?

They have been defined by RCAHMS as **“Forts formed by the erection of defences on the landward end of a promontory”** (1928: xxxix).

The Scottish Historic Environment Records, CANMORE, define promontory fort thus:

A defensive enclosure created by constructing one or more lines of ramparts across a neck of land, in order to defend, or restrict access to, a spur or promontory, either inland or on the coast. Use for prehistoric and early historic sites.

English Heritage defines promontory forts as:

“Promontory forts are a type of hillfort in which conspicuous naturally defended sites are adapted as enclosures by the construction of one or more earth or stone ramparts placed across the neck of a spur in order to divide it from the surrounding land. Coastal situations, using

⁶ (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/peninsula?topic=promontories-and-peninsulas> accessed 26/10/21)

headlands defined by steep natural cliffs, are common while inland similar topographic settings defined by natural cliffs are also used. The ramparts and accompanying ditches formed the main artificial defence, but timber palisades may have been erected along the cliff edges. Access to the interior was generally provided by an entrance through the ramparts. The interior of the fort was used intensively for settlement and related activities, and evidence for timber- and stone-walled round houses can be expected, together with the remains of buildings used for storage and enclosures for animals. Promontory forts are generally Iron Age in date, most having been constructed and used between the sixth century BC and the mid-first century AD. They are broadly contemporary with other types of hillfort. They are regarded as settlements of high status, probably occupied on a permanent basis, and recent interpretations suggest that their construction and choice of location had as much to do with display as defence. Promontory forts are rare nationally with less than 100 recorded examples. In view of their rarity and their importance in the understanding of the nature of social organisation in the later prehistoric period, all examples with surviving archaeological remains are considered nationally important.”⁷

The “Atlas of Hillforts” defines promontory fort as

“These are sites set on promontories e.g. between a river valley and that of an affluent, and in which the principal line or lines of enclosure are drawn across the easiest access. Artificial enclosing works may frequently be absent on the sides which are more difficult to access. Can be either an inland promontory or set on the coastal edge.”⁸

We can note that the two main elements of all these definitions are firstly the topography of a steep sided projection of land and secondly the presence of defensive barriers, although these are both quite widely defined. Although the English Heritage definition suggests other interpretations are possible, the paradigm of defence and fortification is integral to all.

We will look into this question more deeply in chapter 2.

1.4 Sea level rise – How much does this affect our interpretation?

It is important to this discussion of definitions and indeed to our interpretation of these monuments that we are aware of the effects of sea level rise upon the environment in which they were created and used, the resultant erosion and how this may have changed their location. This is also crucial to their future management.

Sea level rise in the Hebrides is relative because it is a combination of eustatic sea level rise and isostatic land change. This is because in an area encompassing the central belt and much of the Highlands of Scotland, sea level is falling in relation to the land, due to sea level rise being outpaced by the isostatic uplift. This uplift grades out to a zero isobase outside which (for example, in the Hebrides) the sea level is rising relative to the land, the land is sinking (Dawson 2003 10). But how much has it changed? Could it affect our interpretation of sites?

⁷ This paragraph is prefixed to every promontory fort entry on the English national environment records, e.g. for Treryn Dinas <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1006733> accessed 02/11/21

⁸ <https://hillforts.arch.ox.ac.uk/assets/types.html> accessed 29/10/21

It is out with the scope of this study to fully review the evidence on this subject, but Edinburgh University, the excavators of An Dunan (a site described below) use Jordan et al's (2010) work at Northton, Harris to suggest that the sea level was not significantly different during most of the late Holocene (Church et al 2013 213). In more detail, Jordan's paper concludes that at around 6,200 BP (c.4200 BC) the sea (or MHWS - mean high water springs) was 2-4m lower around Harris. They then fell slightly, before rising again and eventually reaching approximate present day levels after 3100 – 2100 BP (Jordan 2010 132). Thus before 1000BC sea levels were lower, and up to 4m lower at the start of the Neolithic, but have not changed significantly since.

As a large tide today can see over 4m between high and low⁹ this difference would be like our lowest tide being their highest. This would make a massive difference to the shape of many low lying places, but perhaps less-so to craggy coastlines which tend to have promontories. These would however suffer badly from erosion.

So this factor should be taken into account when interpreting sites, especially the older ones. However the change is not as dramatic as it has been thought of in older publications (e.g. Mchardy et al 2009).

⁹ See for example November 5th 2021 <https://www.tide-forecast.com/locations/Stornoway-Isle-of-Lewis-Scotland/tides/latest>

2.0 Chapter 2: Review of literature.

The following chapter surveys the existing literature pertaining to sites upon promontories in the UK. It will first focus upon studies of promontory sites in order to gain an overview of the current state of research. This section will include the key promontory sites and areas of sites from around the coasts of UK and Ireland. The chapter will then survey a range of opinions and arguments made about promontory sites by influential archaeologists in order to situate the Lewis sites within the current archaeological discourse.

2.1 Studies which focus upon concentrations of Promontory sites

2.1.1 Raymond Lamb – The Northern Isles

The first dedicated study of a separate class” of sites called “Promontory Forts” in Scotland was undertaken by Raymond Lamb, who undertook a survey of sites situated upon promontories in the Northern Isles for a doctorate in the late 1970’s.

Lamb’s now seminal work was titled “Iron Age Promontory Forts in the Northern Isles” but included lengthy discussions of Broch’s and Blockhouses and their origins and development; assuming a priori (along with his contemporaries) that all three were necessarily part of the same defensive continuum (1980: 6). This is perhaps not surprising given the fact that in the Northern Isles virtually every Broch or Blockhouse is situated upon a promontory which is also the site of an earthwork¹⁰.

At outset, Lamb states:

“Coastal promontory forts – “cliff castles” – are among the least understood archaeological field monuments in Britain. Their distribution is almost entirely western, the forts being grouped in Cornwall, Ireland, the Welsh coasts, the Isle of Man, and Galloway, and also to the south in Brittany. This restricted distribution suggests that the promontory forts represent a tradition in themselves and are not just an adaptation of the local brand of hillfort to a coastal site”

Lamb 1980 4-6

We should note that the distribution is slightly mistaken - there are also many sites in the Hebrides and the Moray Firth.

¹⁰ This is not the case elsewhere

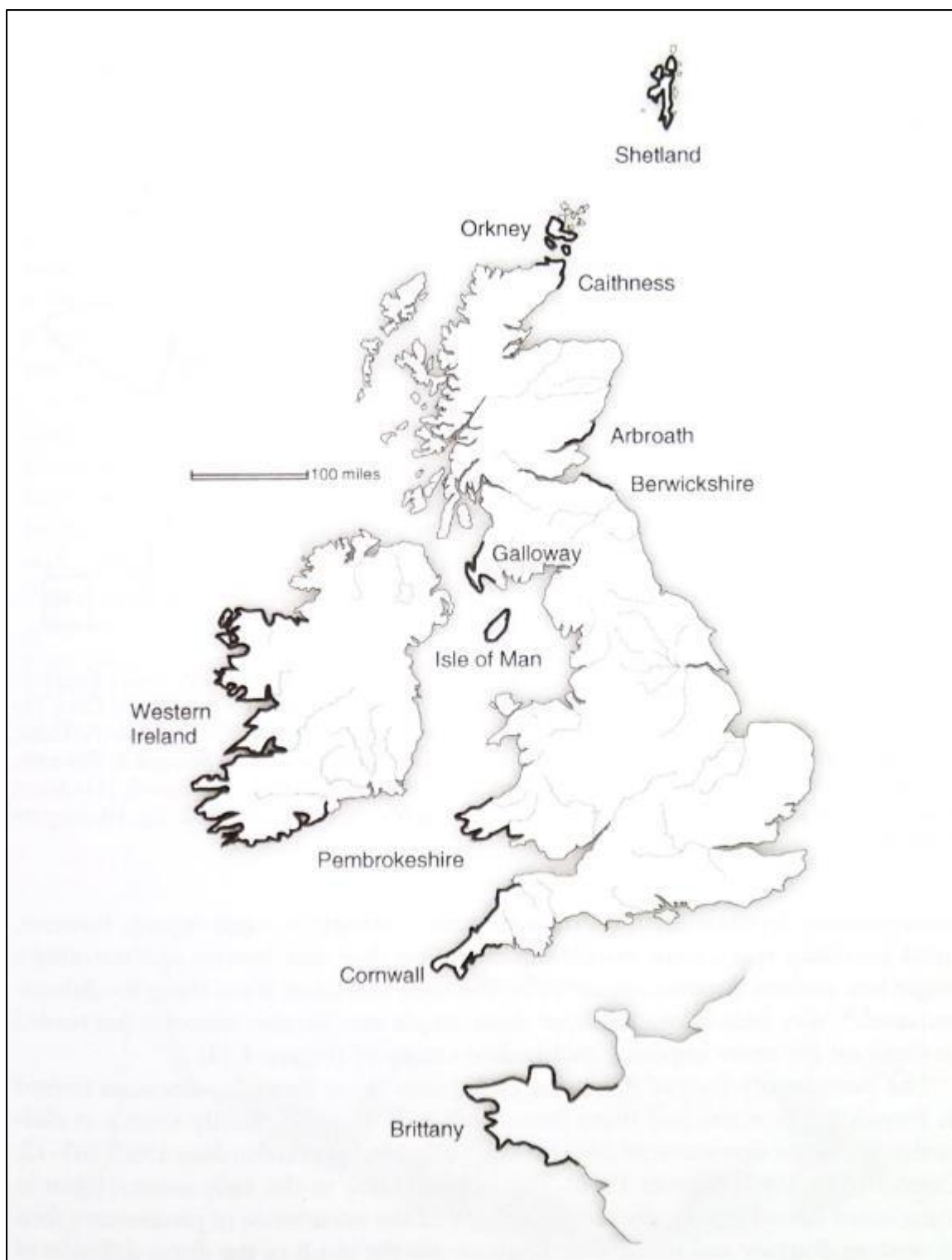


Figure 1: Distribution of Promontory Forts in NW Europe (after Henderson 2007 fig 4.13; itself after Lamb 1980 Fig. 1). NB. There are other concentrations of Promontory sites in NW Spain, Skye and the Hebrides and in Moray & Aberdeenshire.

The first hint that defence may not always have been the primary concern at some of these sites came from observation of the “Blockhouse”: a structure found in Shetland (and in the Hebrides (Burgess 1997 & Mchardy et al 2006 26-32 - *contra* Cunliffe 2005 323).



Figure 2: Ness of Burgi aerial view - picture: Historic Environment Scotland

“The most surprising feature of Ness of Burgi is the wide undefended gap between (it) and the cliff edge... Since the fort clearly is a defensive nonsense without such a wall, it would be reasonable to assume that the barrier had once been complete and that the present state... is a quirk of survival... It will be shown however that this concept of the Blockhouse as an isolated building which can be outflanked is paralleled at other sites, and that we have to reckon with this being part of the original design.”

Other sites were found which did not fit the fortification narrative. At Burgi Geos in Yell, Shetland, a narrow cliff girt neck of land is provided with features – including, supposedly, the most northerly example of a “chevaux de frise” – a feature which if anything conspired to keep the visitor from falling off the cliff. The main area of the promontory is then gained by walking past the blockhouse, which does not bar access either (Lamb 1980 23).

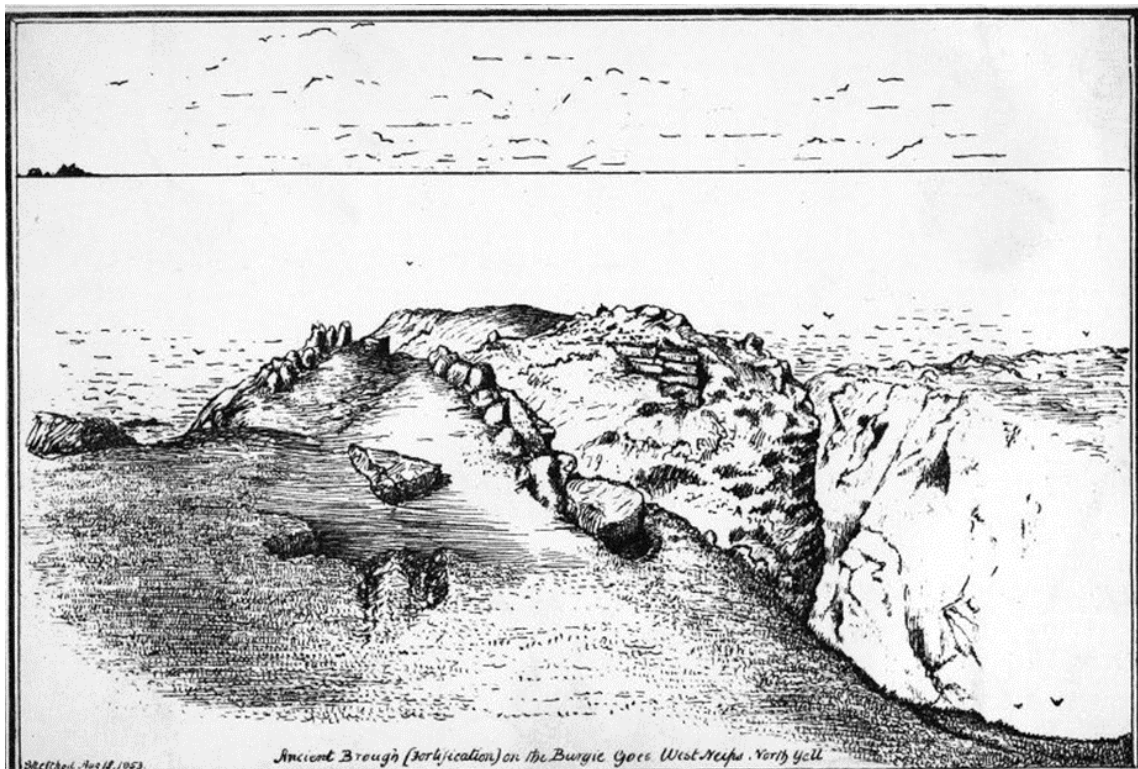


Figure 3: Burgi Geos, Yell, Shetland. Antiquarian sketch, artist unknown.



Figure 4: Burgi Geos, Yell, Shetland. Photo copyright Tim Harrison (cc-by-sa/2.0)

“It is a puzzle that this fort, built to a pattern that could only be prestigious and intended to impress, should also be so remote –entirely inaccessible from the sea, and closed in by a peat moor on its landward side... we see however that Burgi Geos is only the most extreme case of a common tendency. No blockhouse is strategically sited.” (ibid 40)

This may be true of the other promontory sites also. Lamb defines a class of “multi-vallate promontory fort” in Shetland and Orkney, supposedly a different type of site than the “multi-vallate broch outworks” (ibid 43)¹¹. At first sight, these have impressive banks and ditches and do indeed seem to be defensive. Two of them, at Landberg and Hogg island sound, have arrangements of 3 low banks of dumped soil (scraped from a wide area) without any ditch, and a steep slope defended by a stone faced rampart – which he terms “three and one” defences. The low banks of dumped material were never likely to be proper (*hu-*) manned ramparts and he suggests were to break up a charge. However “had the builders used the stone or turf construction traditional in the Northern Isles, they could have erected larger and more effective barriers” (ibid 50). Also, the idea that these defences were against attack by slingshot is unlikely, given that the width of the defences was often around 30m, and the range of a slingshot considered to be 90m (ibid 58 and Wheeler 1943, 50 -51). So what were these “defences” for?

Some sites had softer underlying rock making it possible to dig deeper ditches and make larger ramparts. Two “important ones” (ibid 50) were the Brough of Staal, Shetland and Brough of Windwick, Orkney. Although (strangely) Lamb did not pick up on the point, despite these extensive ramparts the Brough of Windwick is overlooked by higher cliffs within easy missile shot of the central area¹². This makes the so called “defences” pointless – unless of course they are not the kind of defences we are assuming.

Finally, Lamb also discusses a sub-class of promontory fort which he calls “small strengths” where a “weak (univallate) fortification is used to protect a very restricted area” (ibid 68) including Gote o Tram, Caithness; Burgh head and Castle of Sand Geo, Orkney. At these he suggests it is difficult to imagine such small areas could have contained the (*hu-*) man power necessary to defend them.

After conducting his study, Lamb concluded that many promontory sites did not make sense as forts, and further that there were:

“...other promontory forts of individualistic design which do not fall into recognizable categories and the date and function of which could only be determined by excavation”.

(Lamb, 1980 68)

¹¹ These may not be two types of site at all if the Brochs have merely been added to pre-existing Promontory “Forts”. This is not an insignificant observation – there are 729 Broch’s recorded on CANMORE and only 198 Promontory Forts, although many Broch’s are situated upon Promontory’s and have outworks – accessed 27/10/21.

¹² This fact was noted by the author when visiting the nearby Cairns excavation in 2015.

2.1.2 Chris Burgess – Western Isles

In 1997, Chris Burgess published “The Coastal Erosion Assessment, Lewis”, a study for Historic Environment Scotland, and in 1999 produced a paper focusing on the “Promontory **Enclosures** of Lewis”. Although preferring it to “Promontory Forts”, he wasn’t entirely happy with the term - explaining “I am still searching for the correct description for these sites, and would welcome any ideas put forward on the basis of what I describe below” (Burgess, 1999 93).

Burgess states at outset that: “Upon closer examination it could be seen that the range of sites included in this group was massive” (ibid 94). He then goes on to analyse the sites by various means.

Firstly, he defines five different geomorphological areas of the Lewis coast which “the sites can be seen to fall into”, with blank areas in between. “Gaps occur for two reasons, the lack of any form of settlement caused by the remoteness of the area, and the lack of suitable locations for such sites.” (ibid 94). It can be noted however that some of the most built upon promontories on the island are very remote – e.g Stac a Chaisteal (Canmore ID: 4207 & Mchardy et al 2009 22).

Next, Burgess chooses seven different attributes of the sites and analyses the relative proportions of sites with these attributes within these five areas. The seven attributes are:

1. **Physical location** (promontories, headlands, Stacks and cliff edge semi enclosures),

(This requires some explanation:

Promontories where a narrow neck of land extends from the shore and occasionally widens out, in which there is a barrier across the narrowest point,

Headlands that narrow beyond the point of barrier which is the widest point,

Stacks which may be linked or separated to the shore, are barred at the obvious point of access and may have walls surrounding their perimeter.

Cliff edge semi- enclosures which “occupy coastal locations but do not make use of a promontory or headland”)

2. **Internal area** (less than 1 ha, 2 ha, 3 ha and more than 3 ha),

3. **Accessibility to the Sea (yes/no),**

4. **Number of enclosing walls** (uni-vallate, bi-vallate, tri-vallate, multi-vallate),

5. **Construction of enclosing walls** (stone, earth or both),

6. **Sites arranged in a segmented manner** (yes/no),

7. **Sites with internal features** (CARH, Cells, Curvilinear enclosures, long houses, possible blockhouses, platforms, boulder circles, mounds, cultivation).

The results of this analysis are given in tables. No simple patterns can be detected.

He therefore divides all 80 sites into twelve sub classes based upon “location, form and construction methods”. The sub classes are:

Class 1. Blockhouses.

Class 2. Large multi-vallate enclosures with ditches.

Class 3. Large multi-vallate enclosures without ditches.

Class 4. Large uni-vallate

Class 5. Stack sites with stone and turf long houses

Class 6. Monastic sites with cells.

Class 7. Bi-vallate enclosures with CARHs

Class 8. Segmented enclosures with CARHs

Class 9. Large segmented enclosures

Class 10. Small segmented enclosures

Class 11. Large agricultural enclosures.

Class 12. Sites remaining unclassifiable due to state of preservation

He finds that the largest group are univallate sites (22%), followed by sites upon stacks (16%), and then unclassifiable sites (12%). The other subclasses were fairly evenly distributed, representing between 4% and 8% of the total.

Burgess notes in his conclusion:

“This class of site is not a homogenous unit but rather a complex group of features with common locations that potentially span a time period from the Bronze Age to the post medieval period... Furthermore, their functions may be seen to range from the traditional “defensive site” to agricultural and it cannot be ruled out that some performed a ritual function or were a symbol of status in society.”

Burgess, 1999 103

2.1.3 Ronan Toolis – Dumfries and Galloway

From 1996- 2000, Ronan Toolis led a survey of 16 Promontory Forts of the North Solway coast, Dumfries and Galloway, to determine the nature and extent of erosion and “attempt to ... clarify aspects of the nature of occupation of the Galloway promontory forts” (Toolis 2003 37).

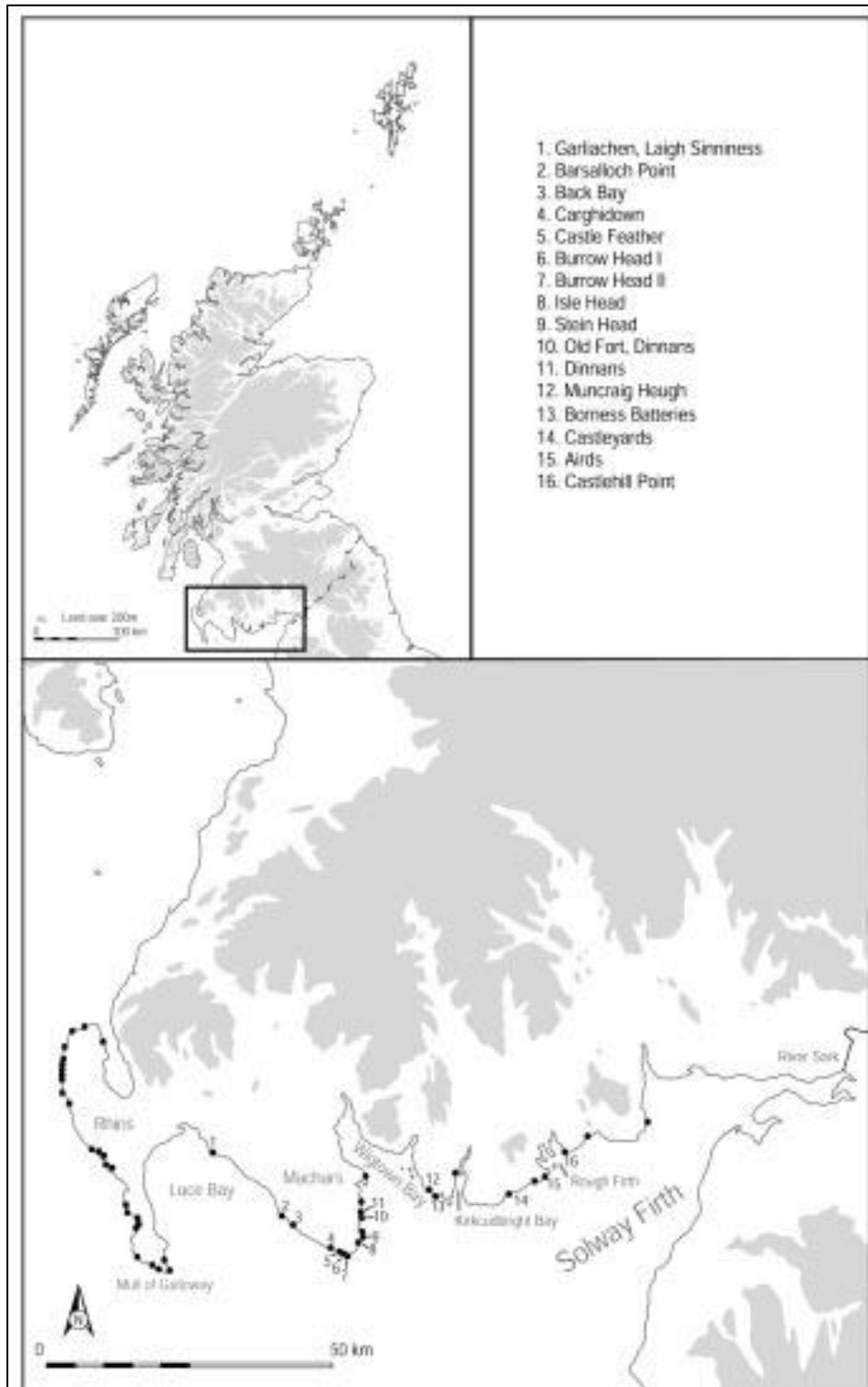


Figure 5: Distribution Map of Promontory Forts on the Galloway coast showing sites selected for survey (After Toolis 2003).

There were sites with univallate (6) and multivallate (10) defences, mostly curvilinear rather than (less resource expending) linear in shape, in earth or stone. Their sizes varied significantly and were split into three groupings:

- (1) an extremely limited number of large sites over 2,000 m² in internal area (2)
- (2) the most numerous group of sites between 800 m² and 1500 m² in internal area (8) and
- (3) a smaller group of sites between 320 m² and 500 m² in internal area (6)

However, “no correlation can be drawn between the size of sites and any obvious characteristic in their morphology, such as rampart attributes, topographical locations or internal features” (ibid 65).

Toolis did not think the majority of the sites were concerned with defence. Many were overlooked by higher ground (ibid 62), like Windwick, mentioned above. Others had enclosures which “appear rather to offer an outward impression of strength without being strictly defensible”. He postulates that the “defences” may have had other functions, such as separating livestock from living areas, or as religious sites, or status symbols (ibid 64).

Trade may have been a factor- there is a large well defended promontory fort not far away at Isle head which is “thought to have been part of a large trade network later in the 5th-7th centuries AD, perhaps connecting Dunadd, Dinas Powys, Dumbarton and Tintagel, with Continental Europe and the Mediterranean” (ibid 66) and he references Laing 1973, 38; Laing 1975, 98; Fulford 1989, 4; Alcock & Alcock 1990, 113-119; Thomas 1993, 93; Campbell 1996, 87 in support of this suggestion.

He states “Despite the use of terms such as ‘forts’ one cannot assume a defensive strategy to the purpose or siting of the majority of promontory forts on the North Solway Coast” (ibid 64). They “do not appear to represent a distinct, homogenous settlement form within the regional settlement pattern at all... While easy to group together in terms of topography, ‘promontory forts’ covers a variety of dissimilar sites, much in the same way that ‘hillforts’ hides a disparate assemblage of sites” (ibid 69).

Toolis concludes his study with the following summation:

The survey has illustrated the considerable variation amongst the promontory forts of the Solway Coast of Dumfries and Galloway. There are evidently complex sequences of construction and re-occupation at a number of sites and there remains the potential survival of significant evidence from some sites for cross-cultural contacts over a long period. However, the chronological range for the initial construction, occupation and abandonment of promontory forts on the North Solway Coast has yet to be established. The form and profile of the boundaries of an adequate sample of sites have not yet been determined, nor have the nature and status of the occupation and reoccupation of these sites been resolved. Evidence for the nature of the occupation of promontory forts must be collected if the relationship of these sites to their contemporary landscape, land-use and the greater settlement pattern is to be clarified. More evidence must also be gathered if a better understanding is to be attained of how the promontory forts of the North Solway Coast fit into patterns of maritime activity, such as local and long-distance trade; a research theme of more than local significance (Barclay 1997, 32)” (ibid 74).

2.1.4 Gordon Noble – Moray Firth

Gordon Noble (2016) considered a number Promontory Forts along the Moray firth, Highland region in the 5th and 6th centuries AD, which he sees as part of a “re-emergence of fortified enclosures and settlements” occurring during “a transformative period ... with the first references to kings and kingdoms in a northern British context”. Although this *flourit* was early medieval, it is acknowledged that these promontory forts also sometimes reused Iron Age sites, as evident at Cullykhan, Aberdeenshire (Greig 1970, 1971).

The biggest and most spectacular of these was at Burghead, a site which leaves no doubt that it was a fort: “In the lower fort the ramparts were composed of an inner and outer drystone wall utilising dressed and carefully quarried stone. Between the facing-walls was a core of earth, stone and midden material...The two facing-walls were linked or at least bonded to the rampart core by oak planks and logs riveted together in places by iron nails or spikes up to 0.2 m long. Young identified that the lower citadel rampart had been over 7.0 m wide and perhaps as much as 6.0 m high” (ibid 436).

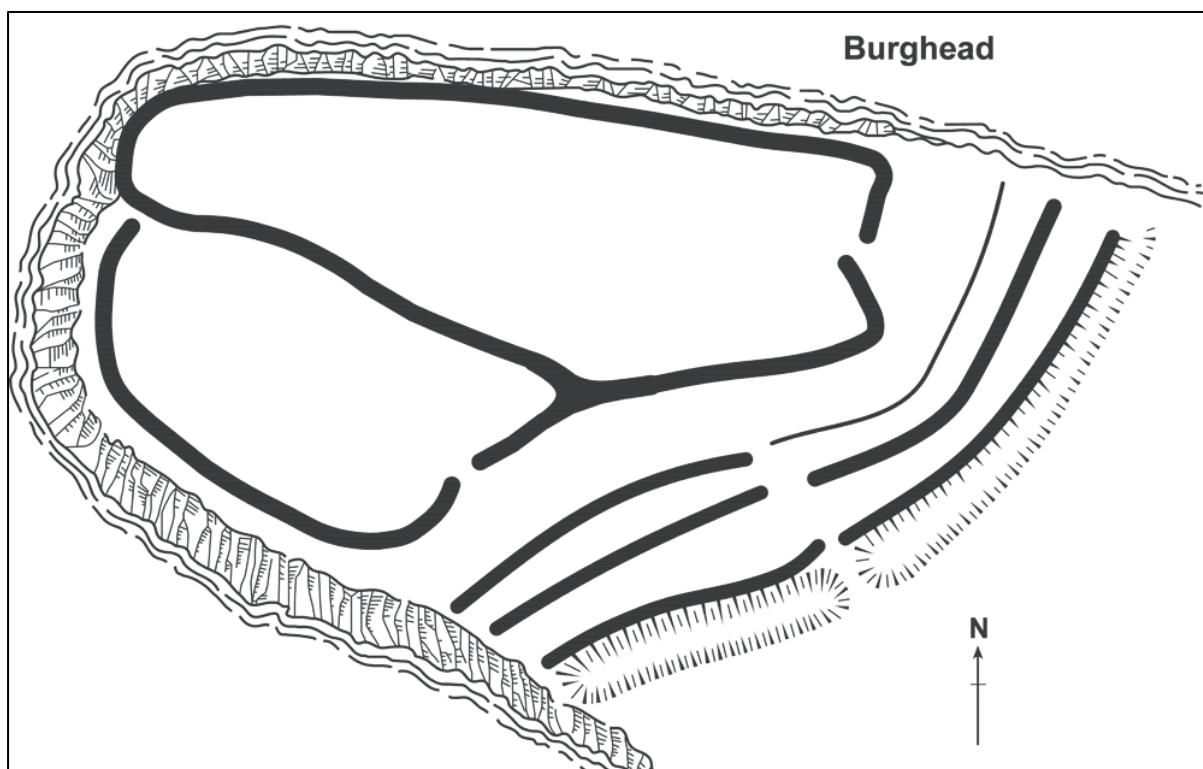


Figure 6: Burghead Promontory Fort (after Noble 2016 Figure 3.1).

However the site also has cult associations which may date from pre-Christian times (ibid 33-34 & see Foster 2004 43-44). Due to this and other factors Noble comments that “the power of fortified sites of the type outlined above did not simply rely on their military roles, nor in their role as elite residences, but as sites where the ritualised and spiritual dimensions of ruler-ship were conducted, embodied and underpinned.” And again: “The ideological and cult dimension to fortified sites in northern Britain was also clearly important and these latter characteristics are important dimensions that should be addressed in future work.” (ibid 34)

In this light it is interesting what Christine Clerk (2019) comments in her study “Burghead, Moray: a history of archaeological thought”:

“Burghead emerges into archaeological thought relatively late, in the works of Hector Boece (1537)... Burghead is a ‘Danish’ fort perhaps superimposed upon a native stronghold. Boece makes no mention of Picts at Burghead. Enlightenment thinkers — all educated in the classics and fully conversant with Roman civilisation— were predisposed to find Burghead to be Roman. The ‘Roman station’ identified by William Roy was viewed through the eyes of a military surveyor and defined by ‘ramparts’. This word became stubbornly rooted in all subsequent archaeological writings, even though archaeological excavation has frequently demonstrated that the enclosures are well-built drystone and timber-laced walls. The Roman thesis declined during the nineteenth-century... Nineteenth century antiquarianism was infected by new ideas such as romanticism and nationalism and therefore willing to discover the roots of native culture in archaeological remains... And so, the Picts arrived at Burghead in the twentieth-century — as scientific archaeology yielded early medieval (Pictish era) dates for structures within the headland... The Pictish identification of Burghead is unquestioned by modern archaeologists – just Roman and Danish identities were unquestioned before... Each generation inevitably views the past through the distorting lens of present predispositions (Oram 2007). We await with interest the next-generation development in the interpretation of the unparalleled Burghead headland.”

(Clerk 2019 74)

2.1.5 Barker & Driver - Pembrokeshire

Three promontory forts on the Castlemartin peninsula – Linney Head Camp, Flimston Bay Camp, and Greenala Point Fort – were surveyed by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW) as part of a wider study, which “raised new questions concerning our understanding of this monument type” (Barker & Driver 2011 65). The Pembrokeshire coast is host to an intriguing concentration of Promontory sites: “They occur in a density unparalleled in the rest of Wales ... yet similar to that found along the Cornish coast” (ibid 65).

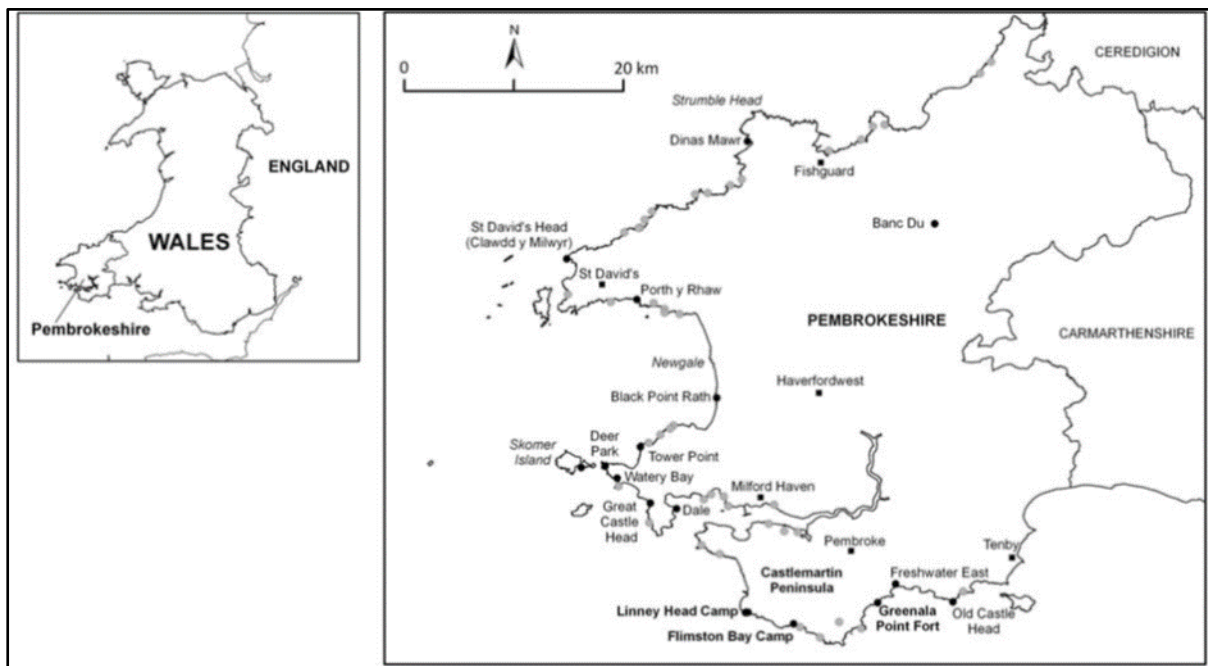


Figure 7: "General location map showing Wales, the county of Pembrokeshire inset with the locations of all 58 coastal promontory forts and the Castlemartin Peninsula study area (after Barker & Driver 2011, crown copyright OS licence number 100022206)

The Castlemartin peninsula is formed of Carboniferous limestone which generates some of the richest agricultural land in Wales (ibid 69). Bronze age burial and ritual sites are abundant and excavations at the heart of the area revealed evidence of activity from the Early Bronze age through to the Roman period. It was an intensively used landscape (ibid 70). The “Forts” are also generally a lot bigger than the northern ones discussed so far and have much more impressive ramparts.

Linney head camp, for example, has 3m tall, stepped ramparts, similar to “*Murus Duplex*” defences and embellishment at the entrance with an enclosed forecourt area. These are univallate to the east of the entrance and bivallate to the west. It has seen at least 4 phases of remodelling and embellishment.

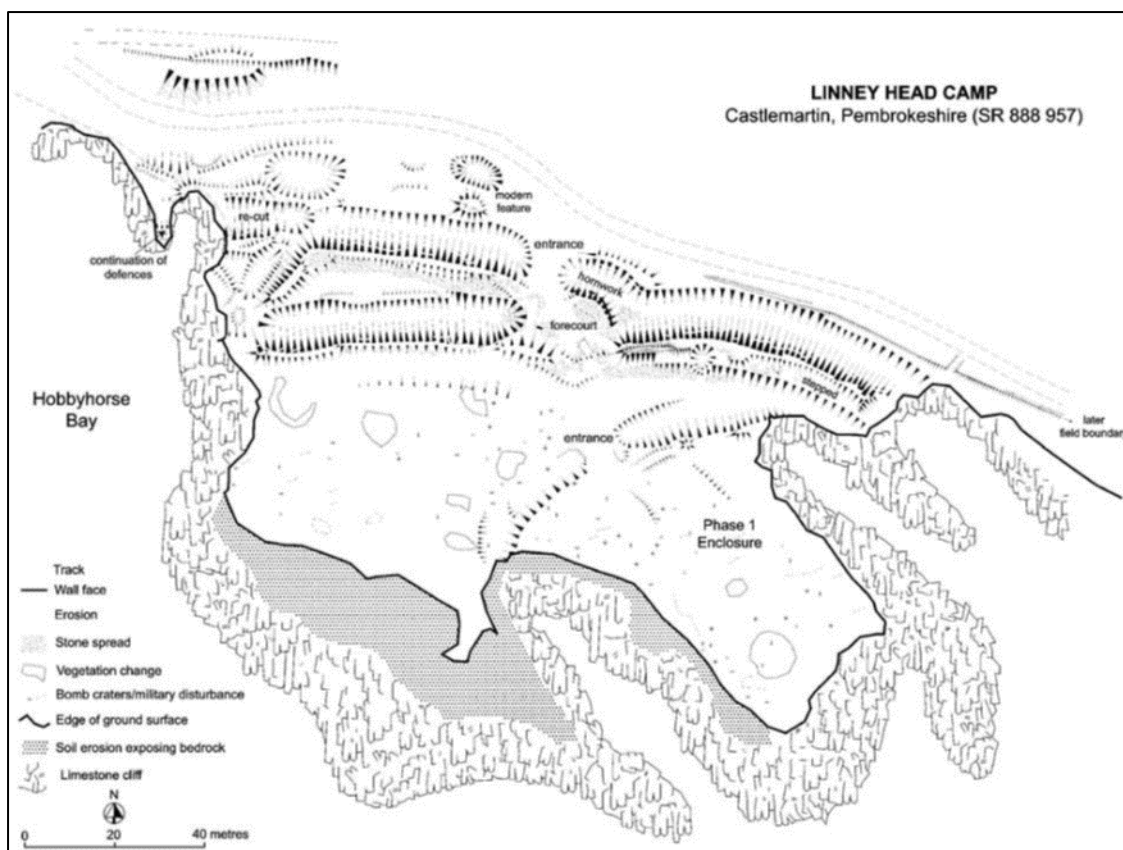


Figure 8: Linney head camp, showing phases of remodelling (after Barker & Driver 2011)

There is an earlier, denuded smaller enclosure within the massive ramparts and slightly overlain by them on the east, thought to represent the earliest phase of activity. Then in phase 2 a larger area was enclosed by a single rampart and turned in entrance. In phase 3, a step was added to the eastern rampart and a second rampart added to the west, and the entrance rearranged. Phase 4 is an oblique bank cutting across the two western ramparts close to the current cliff edge – suggested to be in response to cliff loss in prehistory. A small section of bank surviving on a projecting tongue of rock separated from the present fort proves that it was indeed larger in the past, and its much denuded state suggests that the ramparts of the fort were since “remodelled and made more robust” (ibid 71).

All this implies a long history of occupation, especially as the cliff edge seems not to have changed much since this remodelling, implying a slow rate of erosion. Indeed “Within and around the fort, flint artefacts of both Mesolithic and Neolithic date have been recovered (Burrow 2003, 234; Wainwright 1963, 104). There are also later Bronze Age dates from the excavated coastal promontory forts at Dale (Benson & Williams 1987) on the western side of the Milford Haven, and from Porth y Rhaw on the north side of St Brides Bay (Crane & Murphy in prep.) Murphy even suggests that promontory forts may be south-west Wales’s earliest defended settlements (Murphy & Murphy 2010, 5).

Barker and Driver take up a discussion started by Ian Ralston, when he noted “the utter lack, to date, of subsidiary works or ‘safety barriers’ of any form having been discovered edging the interiors of coastal promontory forts ... in order to prevent children, the frail or the elderly being toppled over the side by the force of the wind (Ralston 2006 28). They add that there is an “equivalent risk to livestock from falls over the edge, with a consequent economic impact for the occupants”(Barker and Driver 2011, 28). “Today one does not regularly walk alongside unfenced, precipitous, and potentially lethal sheer cliffs” as they say (ibid 78).



Figure 9: Flimston bay camp - not the safest place to live! (after Barker & Driver 2011)

The average promontory fort is *not the kind of place you would live in* – they are peripheral to the centres of settlement. Even in Pembrokeshire, where they are close to fertile well inhabited land, they are still on the edge - literally. This rather obvious point has been repeated by various authors yet it seems more could be made of it – discussion always seem to revert back to assuming these places are in some way normal settlements.

They conclude:

“Their highly variable architecture – coupled with some unusual characteristics of topography and setting – may indicate varying functions among even closely neighbouring sites... The evidence revealed from the study suggests that some coastal promontory forts may have been exclusively used for ceremonial or seasonal activity, while others may have been quite different prestigious residences investing heavily in monumental architecture. In conclusion, there is considerable merit in the detailed resurvey and re-investigation of coastal promontory forts within distinct regional groups to shed new light on our understanding of this later prehistoric monument type.” (ibid 65)

2.2 Synthesis works

2.2.1 Barry Cunliffe

In 2001, Barry Cunliffe published his magnum opus of the coastal archaeology of Western Europe, entitled "Facing the Ocean – the Atlantic and its peoples". Discussing promontory forts (aka cliff castles in England), he argues:

"...they are obvious places to defend, and wherever there are such promontories defence might be expected. But these places are quite often remote and inhospitable, exposed to extremes of weather and distant from productive land. Yet they were chosen in their hundreds and some were certainly occupied. Could it be that there was some imperative, other than ease of defence, which attracted communities to these places? Perhaps it was the sense of being at the interface between land and ocean where the powers of both could be harnessed: it is not too fanciful to regard cliff castles as liminal places giving access equally to the land and the sea. Such matters are difficult to pursue using only the archaeological data, but continuity back into the Neolithic period, demonstrable at several sites on the Channel Islands and in Brittany, might suggest that such places had a special significance, recognized and respected across time. Similarly, the number of major promontories along the south and west coasts of Iberia were specifically noted by various classical writers as being sacred to the gods. As landmarks for mariners they would have had a special part to play in helping ensure safe passage. In the medieval period the siting of crosses and even small chapels on promontories served to guide sailors and provided places where propitiary offerings to the local saint could be made by the fearful and the grateful. It is possible, therefore, that the cliff castles were special places used by Atlantic communities to help articulate their relationship with the sea".

(Cunliffe 2001 363)

He elaborated upon this point in 2005:

The choice of dramatic location and the investment of energy in creating the often substantial defences imply a desire to impress, but the purpose of these structures is still quite uncertain. Those which have been examined by excavation have usually produced domestic debris and traces of small circular houses, but the remoteness of many of the sites, their exposure to extremes of weather and the comparatively limited area within suitable for habitation together make them far from ideal settlement locations. While they could have been places of refuge or even homes for the elite, it is not unreasonable to suggest that they may have served as sacred locations symbolically sited at the liminal space between land and sea. They are all dramatic locations and some incorporate natural phenomena such as the great rock stack Trevyn Dinas (Sharp 1992, Herring 1994). A thorough excavation of one of the cliff castles may throw some light on the situation.

Cunliffe, B. 2005 289

2.2.2 Dennis Harding

Dennis Harding, an authority on the iron-age, states:

“Often far from practical as settlement or even as defensive sites, it is arguable that these sites were expressly selected as prominent landmarks of maritime communities, intended to make a territorial statement to sea-borne traders and traffic”

(Harding 2004 94)

Elsewhere he states:

“Promontory forts and headland forts, especially where their perilously precipitate location seems unduly hazardous for normal occupation, could perhaps have served some ritual purpose. Enclosure evidently served a variety of different purposes in later prehistory and early history, and the association of sites, large and small, simple or complex, into a single category of hillforts has undoubtedly been an oversimplification of archaeological classification”

(Harding 2004 298)

2.2.3 Niall Sharples

In 2006, commenting about Orcadian examples, Sharples points out that both the Broch of Gurness (Hedges 1987) and the Broch of Mid howe (Callander and Grant 1934) are on Promontory's which have been “defended” by rock cut ditches and stone revetted banks (Sharples, N 2006 292) – only, like a Henge, the ditch is inside the bank on the promontory side, making it useless as a defence. He offers Warners (2000) idea that this configuration of bank and ditch is to protect the people outside of the promontory from what is inside the promontory. “This could be some trace of past activities, spirits, the dead or even some kind of practice or activity that was taboo or dangerous” (Sharples 2006 p39-44). He suggests that this could be to do with the “dangerous forces that were generated by communicating with the ancestors” as both of these Broch's – like many others – were built upon Neolithic Chambered Tombs (ibid 293).

This has also been noted at Scatness and Ness of Burgi in Shetland (Carter et al 1995, but discussed in Gilmour 2000 46).

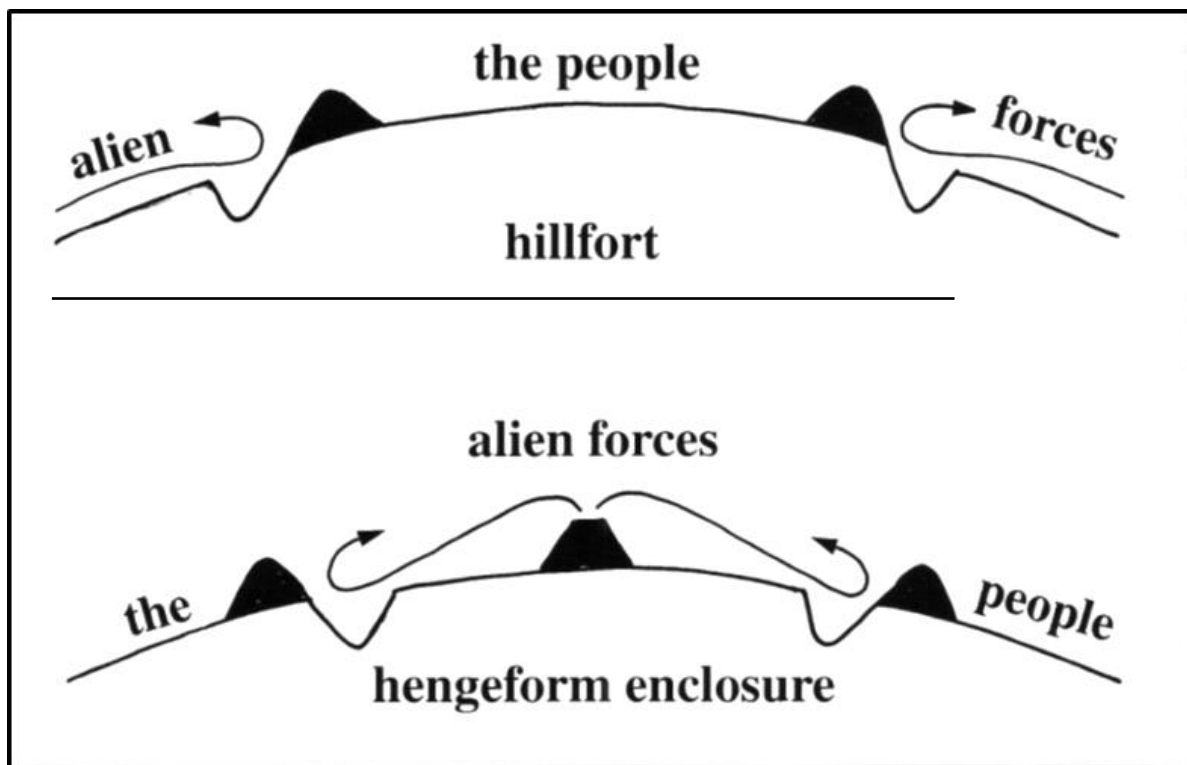


Figure 10: The difference between a hillfort or other defensive structure and a "hengiform enclosure" (after Warner 2000)

2.2.4 Jon Henderson

Henderson's work is one of the fullest discussions to date about promontory sites in the UK, Ireland, France and Spain (Henderson 2007 128-135). Firstly, he points out that just because there are defensive sites upon promontories throughout the Atlantic region this does not necessarily imply the spread of a unitary culture (as suggested by various authors including Hogg 1972 & Lamb 1980), although they may well "reflect commonalities of behaviour".

Regarding the RCAHMS definition (see introduction), he argues that "such a loose definition lumps together of a wide variety of sites of varying size, structure, date and presumably function" (ibid 128). He points out that there is also a wide variety of types of promontory upon which these sites sit, some being high above the sea and generally inaccessible, others are more approachable by sea. The variety in forms of sites is also clear – leading to the question of dating and function. Interestingly, he uses the terms Promontory Fort, Promontory enclosure and Promontory site variously throughout the text reflecting an implicit assertion that they are not all forts.

Henderson points out that the majority of sites are actually uni-vallate and less than 1 hectare¹³, and consequently of little use as Forts. The focus of attention is drawn by the bigger multi-vallate sites, which may also have to do with status and power. Clearly, these may be two completely different types of site, or one can be embellished and end up as the other. This is an important point when discussing typology and dating but often seems to be overlooked - sites may have had a long history

¹³ This is attested in NW France (Wheeler and Richardson 1957), Guernsey and Jersey (Bender and Cailland 1986 49) Ireland (Westropp 1910 1911 1912; Raftery 1994) and Argyll, Western Isles and the Northern Isles (he gives Lamb 1980 68 as a reference for the Northern Isles, a page which does not actually support the assertion, although it is attested for the Northern Isles elsewhere in Lamb's work. However Burgess 1999 does support his assertion regarding the Isle of Lewis)

of use and have structures from successive periods. We know that there are sites on promontories with activity back in the Neolithic (Sharpe 1992) and Henderson notes that Gob Eirer in Lewis was dated to the late Bronze Age (giving Burgess 1999 and Harding 2004 as references although we can now add Nesbitt et al 2011). Dunbeg promontory fort in Co. Kerry has a ditch dated to the eighth century BC. In Cornwall, Maen Castle and Trevelgue have also produced late Bronze Age/ early Iron Age pottery. However the construction of ramparts, fundamental to their interpretation as “Forts” or “Castles”, is usually dated – upon limited evidence – to the Iron Age¹⁴(Wheeler and Richardson 1957: 102 -32; Herity and Eogan 1977: 227; Lamb 1980: 62-4; Armit 1992: 96; Giot 1995: 276-83; Maguer 1996: 110-20). Henderson concludes that “many sites represent multiple phasing and the creation of multiple ramparts may have more to do with individual site circumstances than chronology”. This point is underlined by examples of multivallate sites which have undoubtedly been created by activities in more than one period – The Rumps, Cornwall (Brooks 1974) Gurnards Head (Gordon 1940); Kervedan, Ile de Groix, Morbihan (Thriepand 1945; Giot 1995: 282). In fact he states that “As in the south-west (of England) the majority of Armorican sites are associated with evidence of earlier activity - pottery, burial monuments and other finds” (ibid 133).

Finally, Henderson points out that with such a “diversity of types” a range of different functions seems likely, although there is a lack of evidence for and practical unlikelihood of many of these sites ever having functioned as defended domestic sites similar to many Hillforts (ibid 133). Excavation has seldom recovered evidence of permanent settlement, and the sites are so exposed and uncondusive to settlement as to make it “difficult to imagine anyone – let alone an elite grouping – choosing to live on them” (ibid 135). He goes on to discuss what other functions they may have had - suggesting (in addition to defence): agricultural, trading (as also suggested by Cunliffe 2001 78) or ritual foci (as also discussed by Sharpe 2001), whilst noting that none of these interpretations would apply to all the sites, and some may have had combinations of these uses.

2.2.5 Adam Sharpe

On a visit to the site of Treryn Dinas in Cornwall the author finds a sherd of bronze-age bucket-shaped funerary urn near an enigmatic balanced rock known as “Logans rock”, near the summit of this “cliff castle”, and begins to question the received interpretation of *all* such sites:

“Whilst the ramparts at the Rumps, the Dodman or Bolt Tail in South Devon enclose fairly extensive areas of more or less level ground (and could therefore have sustained a small population and its animals in time of threat, who in their right minds would retreat to Treryn Dinas, Kenidjack Head, Giant's Castle off Salakee Downs on St.Mary's, Scilly, Gurnard's Head, or worst of all, Tubby's Head near St. Agnes? In each of these cases (and members will be able to think of other comparable examples in their own areas) the ramparts enclose little more than areas of rock outcrop, and in the last case, the interior of the cliff castle is strategically totally indefensible, lying as it does at the base of a cliff-slope which completely overlooks the whole of the site.” (Sharpe 1992 65)

These thoughts lead him to an inevitable conclusion, as with so many of the authors mentioned here:

¹⁴ Although this list could now be added to, his statement that “due to lack of concerted fieldwork on promontory sites... precise dating range remains obscure” would still hold true.

“Perhaps, then, (and this would not have been for the first time) we have been treating as a single group a collection of sites which have no more in common than their location and apparent form - in this case headlands enclosed by ramparts of one form or another” (ibid 65).

He can't help but see similarities between “the sub-group of cliff castles which consist, in the main, of enclosed rocky headlands, and ... tor enclosures or defended hilltops”, many of which also consist of a tightly enclosed rock without obvious defensive capabilities. Such hill top enclosures have been shown to be Neolithic.

“In each case the constructional vocabulary is similar - a prominent natural feature whose special significance is indicated by the addition of a constructed encircling ring of stone ...we might extend the range still further to include entirely artificial monuments which share some of the same characteristics - cairns with kerbs or enclosing banks, and even stone circles where, perhaps the bounded special place did not require a natural outcrop as central focus. (ibid 66)

Then he suggests a way in which these kind of sites may have developed into defensive or defensive looking sites:

“If some cliff castles are the maritime equivalents of enclosed tors, we should be beginning to think about them as initially Neolithic sites... The re-use of some of these sites within the Iron Age may point to a continuation of the importance of these particular places within the landscape - indeed it may have been particularly important to lay claim, in some fashion, to these places in particular, and we should not discount their continued use in re-affirming local identity and group affiliation” (ibid 68).



Figure 11: Treryn Dinas - not a particularly commodious place to live! From 'A week at the Land's End' by J T Blight (1876).

And finally calls time on our outdated interpretations:

Places of defence? Trading centres? Does the evidence sustain these ideas still? Is it time seriously to consider the whole subject of cliff castles afresh? These are not new ideas, merely ones which have not been considered for a while. It is now over a century since Robert Hunt wrote (of Logan Rock): 'Nothing can be more certain that through all time, passing on from father to son, there has been a wild reverence of this mass of rock...the mass of rock on which is poised the Logan Stone has ever been connected with the supernatural'. (Hunt, 1865 330). P68

2.3 Conclusions

The most consistent thing about the above studies and authors opinions is the inconsistency of the kinds of sites which are currently categorised under the term “promontory fort”. This is clearly masking different types of site under a blanket term – in chronology alone, activity upon such sites stretches from at least the Neolithic to the Medieval and is not restricted to the iron age, as was assumed.

It is also clear that defence is not the only purpose of sites situated upon promontories. There are many other non-defensive promontory sites throughout the UK and Ireland and that this is not just a Lewisian phenomenon. So we can assert that not all sites upon promontories are forts. Further to this, sites which are clearly forts (e.g Burghead) can also have a long biography of reuse and rebuilding – and quite possibly re-purposing, meaning that they may have had other functions beforehand, and other significant aspects when in use.

Most sites are quite clearly peripheral to human settlement. Cliff edges, exposed to the full force of the elements, don’t make for ideal homes. Even if some people did live on promontories, they probably weren’t your average Joe.

Burgess tried to categorise the complexity of promontory sites which he encountered, and has obviously attempted to be as “objective” as possible in doing so, restricting himself to categorising the extant physical remains of structures. However the 12 different categories he ends up with do nothing to enlighten an inquirer of the purpose of the structures. Indeed, it is also unlikely that anyone in the past made distinctions such as that between “large multi-vallate enclosures with ditches” (class 2) and “large multi-vallate enclosures without ditches” (class 3) or between “large segmented enclosures” (class 9) and “small segmented enclosures” (class 10), for example.

As Sorenson (1997) points out

“A fundamental argument in the understanding of typological organisation is that of how the archaeologist views a typology: either the typology created has some relationship to kinds of categories or meaning within prehistoric societies, or typologies are just a tool to create order in data and are arbitrary in relation to prehistoric societies

(Sørensen 1997: 181, quoted in Cummings 2019 93).

Burgess’s categories would seem to be more a tool for ordering data in the present than a way of relating to meaning within prehistoric societies.

So how can we better categorise the sites in order to better understand them? Following Sorenson, and as Jon Henderson has begun to do, perhaps we should try to categorise the sites based upon what we currently think “the kinds of categories or meaning within prehistoric societies” may have been, using all the evidence available to us.

To this end, we will now look in detail at the Lewis sites which prompted the enquiry. Hopefully we will now be able to situate these sites within the bigger picture and hence understand their relevance to it.

3.0 Chapter 3: Sites in Lewis

3.1 Dunasbroc

Dunasbroc (Canmore ID 69532; NB 4713 6215) is on the northwest coast of Lewis, near a township called Aird Dell - see figure 6, below.



Figure 12: Dunasbroc (blue dot) in relation to the cultivated land of Aird Dell - not central, but not that far away. Image: Canmore

It is a small, steep-sided, dome of rock connected to land via a low ramp of rock, even at high tide – and so is a Promontory rather than Stack, according to the definitions above. An exposed path with supporting walls spirals up the domed rock face to gain a remarkably flat summit platform of roughly 10 m by 5 m, skirted by another low revetment wall. These walls have been assumed to be defensive in the past (as shown by the prefix “Dun” in the name, although this can also apply to natural rocks which look defensive).



Figure 13: Dunasbroc, showing trenches. Image: Author.

The evaluation took the form of two small trenches, positioned in order to get a cross section of the site and also to record archaeological deposits which were found to be eroding out of the stacks' slopes.

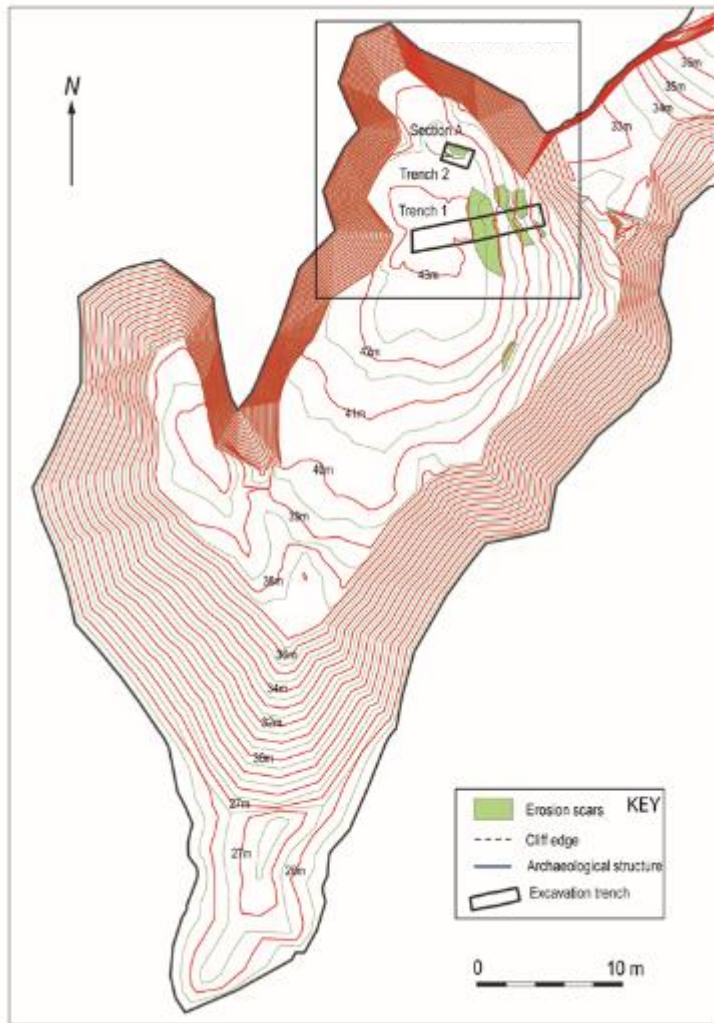


Figure 14: Topographic survey of Dunasbroc (after Mchardy et al 2009)

The main activity upon the stack consisted of large and very hot fires, which covered most of the area of the plateau. Walls shored up and enhanced the plateau and provided an access way spiralling up to it from the southeast. The wall incorporated what seems to have been a stone flue to bring air to the centre of the plateau. Upon the plateau, things were gathered to be burnt – not just fuel but also food and prestige goods. The fuel included almost every available native wood - Birch, Hazel, Conifer, Willow and Rowan and Heather; and also an exotic wood - Spruce/Larch thought to have reached Lewis as driftwood from either North America or Scandanavia- the former being more likely given the effect of the gulf stream. It is interesting to speculate upon what the people may have thought when they found the exotic Spruce wood on the beach, and wondered what strange land it had arrived from. The wide variety of wood burnt at the site seems to imply that an effort was made to gather every available type of native tree, as if each were symbolic. Maybe then the drift wood represented unknown, mystical lands over the western horizon, like the ancient Irish idea of Tir Nan Og. The concentration of Willow towards the northern edge of the plateau was sufficient for the specialist to suggest that there may have been either a wicker structure or group of creels or baskets burnt there. This suggests a gathering of valued produce. There were also some plants commonly found in turf such as grass/sedge stems, underground rhizomes, chickweed/mouse ear and dock. These probably came to the site as dried turf fuel. The food consisted of cereals; six row barley, both naked and

hulled versions, and a single grain of emmer/spelt wheat and meat; Sheep/Goat and Cattle being the only identifiable species. The “weed” type plants are not found in context with the cereals, indicating that the cereals were fully cleaned before being brought to the stack – presumably as ready to use products, as offerings. The prestige goods comprised a fine leaf shaped arrowhead of exotic orange flint, possibly from as far away as England, beautiful Hebrideanware pottery in massive quantities, and an oval stone platter, perfectly flat and polished on one side. There were also some rubbing stones of non-Lewis stone.

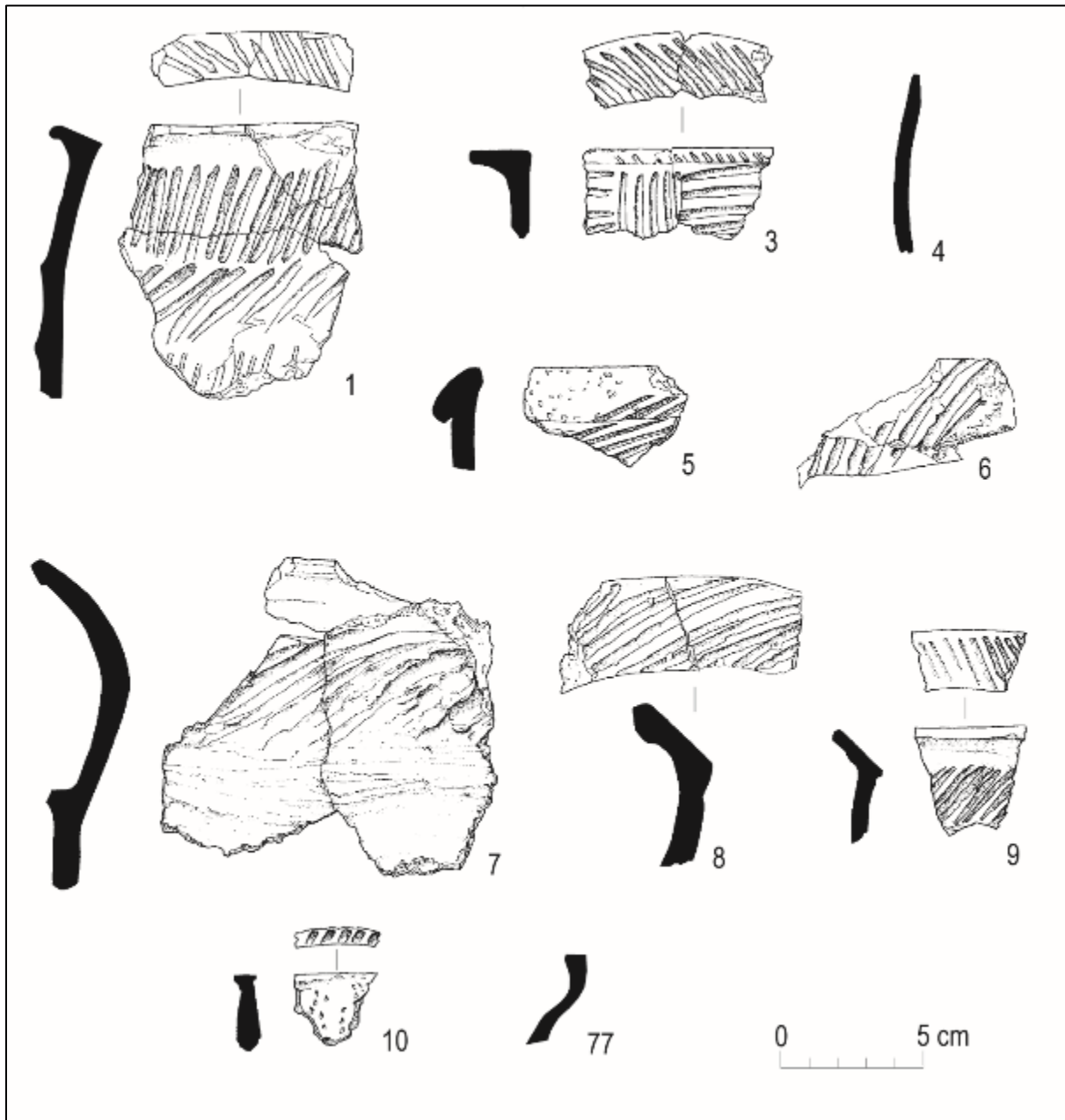


Figure 15: Hebrideanware Neolithic pottery from Dunasbroc (after Mchardy et al 2009)



Figure 16: exotic flint leaf shaped arrowhead from Dunasbroc (after Mchardy et al 2009)



Figure 17: Trench 1 showing putative pathway spiralling up to the summit plateau (Mchardy et al 2009)

We obtained 9 Radiocarbon dates from Dunasbroc. The Neolithic date range from the radiocarbon samples stretches from 4815 ± 35 BP (SUERC13555/GU 15121) to 4570 ± 35 BP (SUERC 13556/GU 15122), ie from 3660 cal BC to 3100 cal BC (at 2-sigma level of confidence; see table 3), a maximum range of 550 years. All the Iron Age dates from the site came from cereal grains, in contrast to the Neolithic dates (see table 3), which were from charcoal. The date range was even tighter than that for the Neolithic, from 210 cal BC (SUERC 13550/GU15119) to 50 cal ad (SUERC 13549/GU 15118; at 2-sigma level of confidence), less than 300 years.

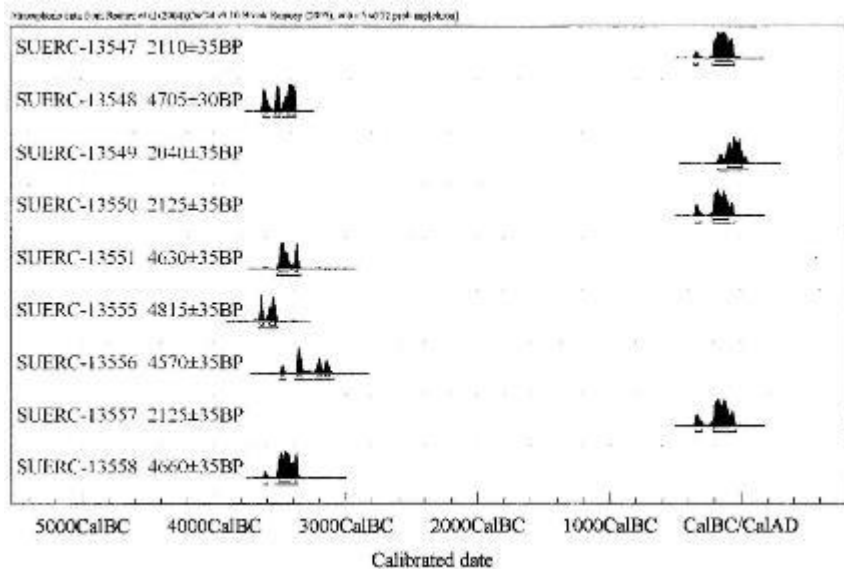


Figure 18: Radiocarbon dates from Dunasbroc (Mchardy et al 2009)

There was great difficulty in interpreting the stratigraphy of the site. All of the cereals dated to the middle iron age, yet all of the charcoal, sometimes found in the same context as the cereals, was early Neolithic. All excavated contexts had mixed iron-age and Neolithic material, implying a period of reuse in the iron-age after a long hiatus which resulted in the mixing of deposits. The walls and lowest deposits were probably Neolithic but time did not allow for their excavation, and it was therefore impossible to tease out exactly what had happened in each period. Clearly there were fires in both periods, but we could not be sure if this was similar in both or if one period was more prolific/hotter/ bigger than the other.

We can say that there was far more pottery deposited in the Neolithic than in the iron-age – c477 sherds versus only 3 iron-age. This would seem to suggest that the main period of use was in the Neolithic, and add weight to the suggestion that the structural elements also belonged to this period.

The lower deposits in the centre of the plateau, consisting a gritty quartz material red with heat, were thought to be entirely natural at first but turned out to be the most intriguing deposit of the site. Micromorphology showed that this material was actually repeated layers of crushed quartz which had been laid down, heated, swept off, and then re-laid, before any fuel residues could percolate down into the subsoils (Mchardy et al 2009 152). The upper layer of this provided an iron-age date from a cereal grain (2125 ± 35 BP, SUERC 13550/GU 15119). The lower layers of this were also clean of any fuel residue or other anthropogenic material and so could not be dated. They could conceivably have been Neolithic, although this would seem unlikely as it would mean that the sweeping clean and

laying of quartz was a ritual which was somehow preserved for 3,500 years. Therefore it seems more likely that the repeated sweeping and laying of quartz was an iron-age activity, and the Neolithic deposits were swept aside for this to happen.

3.1.1 Interpretation

The intact walls and the entirely burnt area enclosed would indicate that we still have most of the original site, and that this was not the site of actual habitation. Industrial interpretations are possible but seem unlikely due to the exposed location – and there was no direct evidence for this; no waster pot sherds as would be found at a kiln site, for example. The site is not ideal for a beacon, being set in from more protruding headlands nearby. The site would make sense as a crematoria, but we couldn't identify any human bone. However this may have been due to the temperatures achieved – the calcined bone indicating temperatures of over 500 degrees centigrade. The bone specialist recorded a large number of "indeterminate mammal". The micromorph report also noted small inclusions "of possible fuel residue material... (which) strongly resemble a type of material inclusion noted in anthropogenic soils associated with fuel residues from highly heated contexts such as industrial furnaces. Previously seen only in urban-influenced, post-medieval contexts..." (ibid 152). There was also the presence of what could have been a flue, taking air into the centre of the plateau. Flues are also present in some Orcadian pyre sites (Downes, J. 2005 110).

Therefore human bone may have been present but broken down into an unidentifiable state. Tantalisingly though, this cannot be proven.

Alternatively, as the site clearly had repeated and unusual activity taking place, we could suggest that this was the site of a repeated votive offering or sacrifice, perhaps to do with the sea (Mchardy et al 2009, 100).

3.2 Gob Eirer

Gob Eirer (NGR: NB 0315 3398; Canmore ID 109407) was excavated by Edinburgh University as part of a landscape focused project with expressed aims to investigate later prehistoric settlement which did “not conform to the standard monumental domestic site”, and were marginal in the sense that they would “incur a high probability of failure of the subsistence basis on which settlement depends’ (Nesbitt et al 2011 p34).

It can be seen from the aerial photograph below that the site is some distance from the cultivated land of the modern township - not central to the most desirable land, but not that far away either, similar to that of Dunasbroc above.



Figure 19: Gob Eirer in relation to the cultivated land of Crowlista township. Image: Canmore



Figure 20: close up aerial photograph of Gob Eirer. Image: Canmore

The “Atlas of Hill forts of Great Britain and Ireland” provides a useful summary description of the site, despite it not being a hillfort:

“This low rocky promontory juts out from the shore on the N coast of Camus Uig. Now separated from the shore by a storm beach, a single wall some 17m in length, with an entrance midway along its length, spans the landward side on the NE. On the surface the remains of this wall are up to 0.8m high and spread between 1.4m and 1.6m thick, but excavation has shown that it is 4m thick at the entrance (Nesbitt et al 2011). The interior measures about 34m from NE to SW by 21m transversely (0.07ha). Within the interior traces of set stones and a T-shaped excavation trench serve to identify the position of two rectangular buildings noted within the interior. The excavations revealed a complex history of occupation, which was resolved by the excavators into four main phases of activity by the excavators and mainly date to the period 800-400 BC, though the contexts of the radiocarbon dates are not provided in the report and their relationship to the wall unclear (ibid). The earliest phase is represented by two stake holes. In the second phase a huge wall foundation 3-4m wide stretches across the stack, pierced by a narrow entrance way framed by orthostats. Paving covers the entrance area and more of the enclosed area, leading to a rectilinear building. Another possible building is some distance away”.

(Atlas of Hillforts of Britain and Ireland, Online, n.d.)

Quartz debitage covered the Stack, with very few actual artefacts, leading the lithic specialist to suggest that

“..the micro-waste may derive from activities other than traditional lithic reduction. Quartz, as well as other forms of stone, may have been crushed for the inclusion in pottery as temper... and it may have been crushed for distribution over monuments such as burials”

(Nesbitt et al 2011, 54)

The ceramics were undecorated, straight sided, plain- or flat rimmed hand-made ceramic vessels of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date. Coarse lumps of quartz temper found in the sherds of the assemblage perhaps support the former interpretation of the quartz debitage (ibid, 56)

The excavators also thought that some smoothing stones may have been for leather working and pumice for preparing hides; perhaps pointing toward craft production on the site. A number of fire cracked cobbles were also present. (ibid, 57)

Hundreds of burnt bone fragments were recovered from the bulk samples but most of these were too small to be identified. Seven fragments were identified: 4 sheep/goat bones, 2 cattle bones and 1 limpet shell fragment.

There was a significant amount of burning on the site – “many thousands of pieces of burnt peat/turf were recovered from across the site, indicating that the dominant fuel type was peat/turf” (ibid, 60). However there was also evidence of Hazel, Alder, Birch, Oak and Ash being burnt as well as Pine, spruce and Larch. Spruce, Larch and Ash are unlikely to have been grown on the island and may represent drift wood... There was also the remains of Barley, both naked and hulled varieties, and a variety of wild plants comprising Cabbage/Mustard, Sedge, Ribwort Plantain, Corn Marigold, Grass, Knotgrass and Sheep’s Sorrel (ibid, 62).

(There was an) apparent deliberate closure of the site with the rubble wall (004) across the access pavement and a layer of cobbles covering the area between the building walls. There is no evidence for burial on the site, no skeletal remains, and no obvious reason for abandonment, for example, there is no evidence for a violent end to the site. It is possible that a ritual closure of the site with stone could echo the closure of tombs, a phenomenon that is known in the Western Isles during the Bronze Age (ibid, 66).

3.2.1 Interpretation

The excavators “entertain three hypotheses based on the chronological context of the site within its region and against the existing archaeological record; (1) that the site is the fragmentary remains of a defensive domestic structure located in a strategically important position within the wider Camas Uig, (2) that the site was a centre for industry, whether that was leather processing or pottery manufacture (or both) and (3) that the site was used as a locus for ritual activity determined by its liminal geography” (ibid, p67)



Figure 21: Gob Eirer. Image: Canmore

In response, it could be argued that firstly, there are no walls around most of the stack, and as the figure 21 above shows it would be easy to climb from the beach from numerous places. If it was strategic, there are equally strategic locations closer to the main cultivatable area, and to better landing places – so why position away from these? Given the exposed and liminal location of the site, it could also be argued that it would also be a strange place to choose for an industrial process – what reason or resource would necessitate a workshop being out here, so far from the area which provided the raw materials, and so exposed to the wind and rain?

As the excavator says, the closest parallel for Gob Eirer is Dunasbroc (Nesbitt et al 2011 67), and neither fit well into domestic or industrial interpretations.

3.3 Eilean na Marbh



Figure 22: Eilean na Marbh in relation to the cultivated land of Bayble township. Image: Canmore

Eilean na Mairbh (Island of the Dead) is a tidal sea stack just off-shore at Bayble on the Isle of Lewis. It stands about 20m high, a few metres offshore, and was almost definitely joined to the mainland by an arch in antiquity. It is accessible by foot at times of extreme low tide only, and requires a steep climb. In response to requests by the local Community Council, a small scale archaeological evaluation was carried out by Ian McHardy and Carol Knott between 2014 and 2018 (as yet unpublished).

The purpose of the work was to achieve an understanding of the eroding archaeological deposits on the summit of the stack for the benefit of the community of Point, to be used as a resource for education, tourism and community development.



Figure 23: Eilean na Marbh from above, with trench, at high tide. Image: Jim Hope (https://www.instagram.com/jim_hope/?hl=en)

Upon the summit plateau which measures 20 x 15m and gently slopes towards the S or seaward side, lie the low and partially grassed-over remains of what we initially thought was a substantial 16 x 7m sub-rectangular structure, with thick dry stone walls, lying with the long access perpendicular to the slope. The northernmost wall of this structure runs along the landward edge of the stack, creating the impression of a defensive wall, although when examined closely it does not run the length of the chasm and seems to be part of the structure described above. Added to which it does not impede access from the most obvious routes up, which if coming from the seaward side are easier angled. We found that built up against this substantial landward wall was layer upon layer of peat ash. On the seaward side the wall turned out to in fact be a series of revetments, stabilising the peat ash deposits building up in the centre of the stack. What may have been a small 2m diameter circular cell appears to have been superimposed at the E end of this. There are no other distinct remains although the large quantity of tumbled stonework may well disguise further archaeological remains. A sherd of ring impressed style pottery, thought to be diagnostically middle Iron Age (Martin Carruthers, pers. comm.) was retrieved from a surface erosion scar when first visited.

A micro-morphology report was produced of a deep peat ash deposit yielding intriguing results. Micro-morphological soil analysis of the peat ash rich deposits showed that:

1. Peat was the main fuel brought to the stack to make fire. Wood was rarely used.
2. These were repeated fires with intervals in between burnings.
3. The last (uppermost) deposit had probably been burnt in situ, ie was not swept from elsewhere. Others below that had been 'dumped' from elsewhere.
4. The burning was sufficiently hot enough in places to Burn bone, and this burnt bone was present in all contexts, implying that the fires specifically included either animal or human remains.
5. The burning was sufficiently hot enough in places to form Calcined bone – between 450 and 650 degrees centigrade, and "phytolith slag" from the silica contained within plants, specifically over 550 degrees centigrade.
6. The bone present was often crushed in situ, after being deposited within the burnt material, strongly indicating human traffic over these deposits, ie trample from human feet in between burnings.

These results confirm that the site was used over a significant amount of time – it was not a one off occurrence. The temperatures reached are on the higher side of typical for a peat fire. This is suggestive of a large, purposefully set and tended fire, especially bearing in mind that all the fuel must have been transported to the stack. The common occurrence of bone would indicate that the fire was not merely a beacon but had the intended consequence of burning either human or animal remains.

Clearly this information is not conclusive, but we can surmise the results of the micro-morph study by saying that large peat fires were repeatedly lit atop Eilean na Marbh, burning animal (and possibly human) remains, around 2,000 years ago. Periods of time elapsed between burnings during which people walked over and trampled the remains of the burnt bones within the ash and also swept ash from some places to others.

This site would appear to have many aspects in common with both the later stages of Dunasbroc and Gob Eirer, but most relevantly here are the many small pieces of burnt bone. It is tempting to imagine a 'long duree' burial rite which explained all of these sites. Something which involved the treatment of the dead in a 'protected' space, removed from the centres of life, which culminated in cremation and the removal of a deceased remains off the site, potentially into the sea, with the possible exception of any bones or residues required for other purposes (cf Armit 2007). If this activity was being carried out extensively in the iron-age it could explain the well-known lack of burials.

3.4 An Dunan

With this in mind we will turn to one final nearby site, and which may help make sense of what we have seen above - An Dunan. This islet site is about 1km from the promontory at Gob Eirer, more central to the cultivatable land.



Figure 24: Gob Eirer (left) and An Dunan (right) in relation to the cultivated land of Crowlista township.
Image: Canmore

“The site of An Dunan (NGR NB0453 3460) is a utilized natural islet near Crowlista, Uig, at the north end of Tràigh nan Srùban, a tidal salt marsh extending north from Uig sands, and cut by several natural watercourses ... An Dunan consists of a raised bedrock knoll in this marsh area. the site is accessible via the salt marsh in normal tidal conditions but also has a rough stone causeway crossing the marsh north-east to south-west from a natural promontory, which provides access during very high tides when the islet is surrounded by water”. Radiocarbon dates provide a date range of late 4th century cal bc to 1st century cal ad. for the site (Church et al 2013 176)

“One of the features of the site that marks it out as unique is the uncharacteristically large ash deposit, a mound that could be described as monumental in terms of other known ash deposits, especially those related to domestic hearths. During excavation, this feature was interpreted as a hearth, however soil micromorphology and mineral magnetic analysis revealed that it was instead an area where ash was deposited after burning, and not an area used for burning itself. (ibid, 214)

The ash contained “hundreds” of fragments of burnt bone, most of which were too small to identify, although one possible human tooth as well as Sheep/Goat, Bird, Fish and Cattle were noted. Environmental analysis revealed traces of Barley – both hulled and non-hulled, Oat, flax, Alder, Birch, Hazel, Apple, Cherry Buckthorn Oak Spruce and Pine. The ash also contained two

prestige objects of exotic material; a broken Amber bead and a Shale Armlet, coarse stone tools including smoothers and pumice, as well as 2,341 sherds of pottery and 1,087 Quartz artefacts, 99% of which were debitage. "Many of the sherds had rock fragments added, and sometimes the presence of larger fragments of quartz was noted" (ibid, p180) – much like at Gob Eirer, only here the source for the quartz is a local vein rather than beach pebble (ibid 183).

The high proportion of debitage seen here, was, much like Gob Eirer, thought to "be related to the crushing of quartz for inclusion as temper within ceramic vessels, as seen in the large quartz inclusions in the pottery from the site. Alternatively, the quartz may have been processed to scatter as a way of emphasising or accentuating the site, as is observed on later prehistoric monuments such as that at Midross, loch lomond (Ballin forthcoming)". (ibid, 192). This last idea may also make sense of the Quartz deposits seen at Dunasbroc, above.

Again, the excavators can easily rule out domestic habitation, and industrial processes, and are left with uncomfortably vague notions of "Ritual".

"..the evidence, combined with the landscape situation, points to An Dunan having been used as a liminal ritual site where votive deposition was occurring, possibly at significant times of the year, and potentially linked with feasting or celebration. The specific ritual significance of the site is unclear".

3.5 Discussion of Lewis sites

These last four sites are, in many ways, remarkably similar: their topographical location upon small promontory's to which access is restricted but not overly difficult, their location close too but *on the edge* of the cultivatable areas, rather than central position such as exhibited by the broch's, and their unusual deposits – in terms of plant, animal, ceramic, lithic, and ash remains. The element of fire has been used to consume the material brought to these places - other than An Dunan where the product of such an activity has been brought from elsewhere. None of these sites conform to what could be described as either habitation or (arguably) industrial or craft production sites, and excavators have been left flailing for answers, calling on the catch all term “ritual” which does little to enlighten. They are certainly not forts, by the definitions given in chapter 2 at least.

More research is needed before any firm conclusions can be drawn. However the forgoing evidence could be explained by suggesting that some sort of *Longue durée*¹⁵ burial rite involving cremation with associated feasting and/or conspicuous consumption was taking place at such sites. The cremations were either very hot, or all recognisable pieces of bone left over were removed afterwards for curation or other purposes - as commonly occurs, for example in Bali, and in Bronze Age Orkney (Downes, J. 2005 85, 75 & 125). Indeed, as Jane Downes found out the day after a cremation in Bali:

“The mound upon which the bodies are burnt retained no visible indications that a body had been burnt even a short time after the ceremony. Burnt bones were removed very efficiently and thoroughly, and taphonomic processes would remove any charred remains, small fragments of pottery and any burnt soil, given the steepness of the slope of the mound and the light, sandy nature of the soil. Indeed, it is probable that no cremated bone would be recovered from the cemetery at all by normal archaeological excavation methods.”

(Downes, J. 2005 88)

Downes also found evidence of animal and plant sacrifice along with the cremation, and she points out that even the fuel for such a conflagration would itself be a sacrifice, which brings to mind the great variety of wood brought to be burnt at Dunasbroc.

An important distinction for Downes when she was investigating these sites was one originally made by Jacqui McKinley – which was the difference between pyre sites and pyre debris dumps (Downes, 2005 98-9 & McKinley 1996). It is tempting to suggest that Dunasbroc, Gob Eirer and Eilean nan Marbh were examples of the former and An Dunan was an example of the latter.

We could also note that at least one important group of Orcadian Bronze Age Barrows containing cremated remains was situated upon a promontory called Elsness on the island of Sanday:

¹⁵ A phrase coined by Fernand Braudel (1902–85), most notably in his *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (1949) to denote long term historical structures.

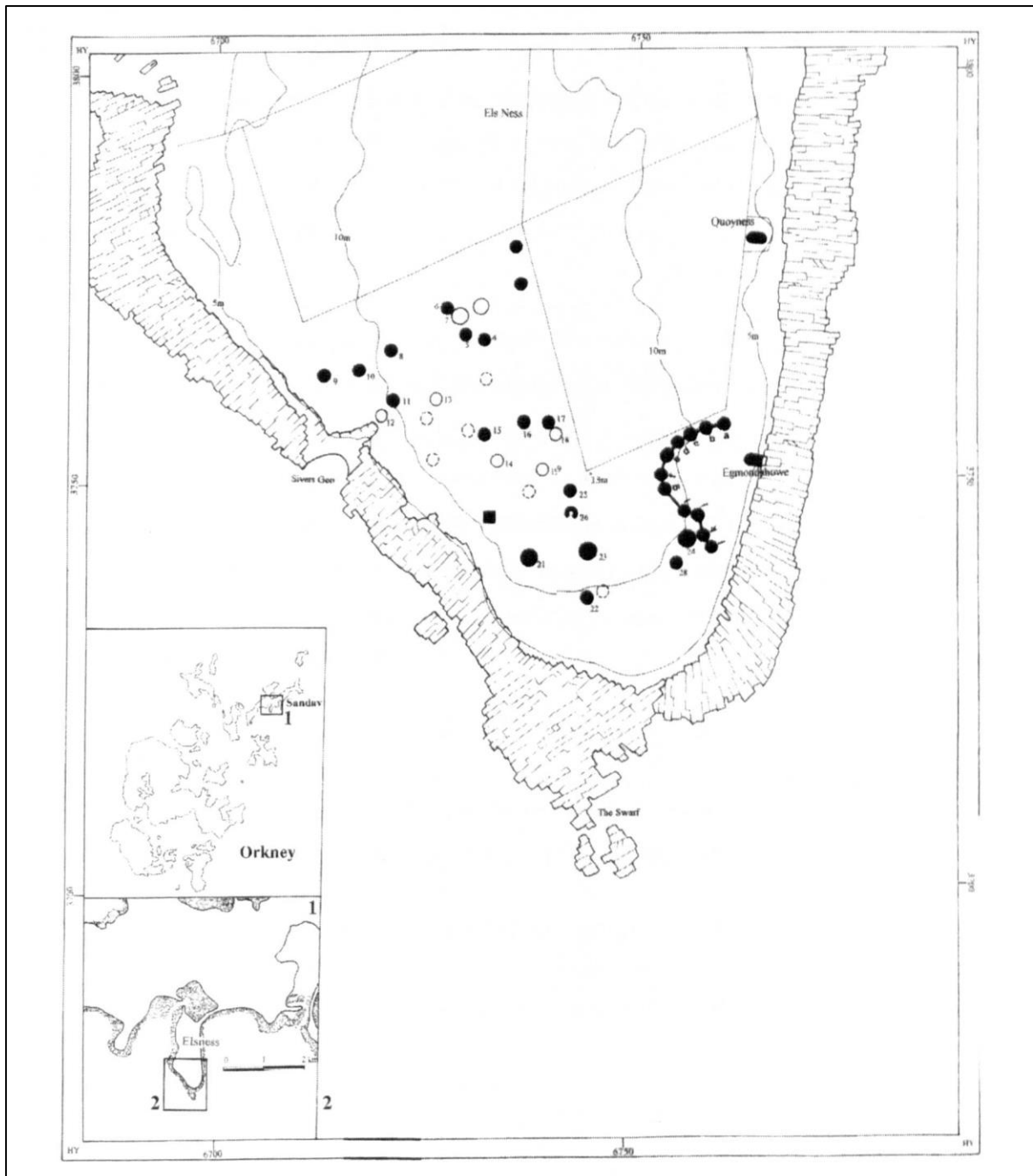


Figure 25: Elsness barrow cemetery, after Downes (2005 54).

However this might not be the case. Alternative interpretations might be some sort of sacrificial fire, perhaps to the sea or the sun as it set across it.

Finally, the fact that ashes containing these materials were brought to An Dunan to be deposited opens up the possibility that material from sites such as Gob Eirer, Dunasbroc and Eilean na Marbh could have been curated and utilised as votive deposit, perhaps even for the founding of habitations such as Brochs – as it should be noted that both Dun Barabhat and Loch na Berie occupy locations which are topographically very similar to An Dunan.

4.0 Chapter 4: Re-interpretations

Whatever they actually are, the Lewis sites show that there is clearly a lot more going on than just fortification, and we would surely benefit from developing a more nuanced terminology, attentive to the assumptions we commonly make.

When we use the word “Promontory” we are grouping together many different types of landform, and closer attention to the morphology of each site may provide clues as to what each was used for.

With the word “Fort” we could argue that the paradigm of violence has been over used in our interpretation. As Toolis states about the Galloway sites:

“The function of the ‘defences’ of many of the sites may have simply adhered to domestic needs, such as the separation of domestic livestock from living areas for instance (Cunliffe 1991, 494), or perhaps the definition of ‘religious sites’, as has been suggested for many similarly exposed promontory forts elsewhere in Atlantic Europe (Cunliffe 2001, 346; Cunliffe 2002, 89). Alternatively the ramparts may have simply been symbolic of the status of the inhabitants as postulated for other sites in Dumfries and Galloway.”

(Toolis 64)

So, if we are masking a number of different types of promontory site under the one term, what other types of use does the evidence suggest?

4.1 Types of Promontory site

As well as the putative “pyre sites” of Lewis, chapter two suggested a number of alternative uses of these sites suggested by various authors, all with demonstrable examples.

So, remembering Sorenson (1997), it is suggested we try re-classify them according to our best understanding of what was meaningful in the pre-history - the sum total evidence we so far have, with emphasis upon the particular morphology of the so called promontory and its place within the wider land and sea scape. To try and generalise, there was evidence for the following uses:

Defensive spaces.

Trading spaces.

Secular meeting places.

Agricultural spaces.

Sacred/Religious spaces

This list is not exhaustive – there are many other uses. In historic times, there are Early Christian Monastic sites upon promontories, and others which are prisons, and of course there are lighthouses and beacons. Space does not allow for a discussion of all of these.

4.1.1 Defensive space

The criteria for interpreting a site as a defensive fort must include cognisance of the landform. If a site is closely overlooked for example, it cannot be a fort. If a site has an enclosure wall but is easily accessible from another direction, such as at Gob Eirer, or the Blockhouse sites in Shetland, it is not a fort. These are simple proscriptions, yet strangely have not taken root in our interpretation of these sites.

Some sites were undoubtedly defensive in their last incarnation, but this does not preclude them having other, perhaps equally important uses both before and during. As Murray Cook says about Hillforts in Strathdon:

“...certainly the term ‘hillfort’ implicitly assigns a motivation for the construction and use of a site (Armit, 1997: 46–65) and yet in the absence of any other data this is precisely what archaeology cannot divine: intention. Enclosed sites could have been designed for a variety of motives: to honour the ancestors, as market places or meeting points, making defence one of numerous options.” (Cook, M. 2013 78)

“It is clear that violence and warfare were real and that it is plausible that in Strathdon in both the Middle Iron Age and Early Medieval Period that there was a connection between the certainty and/or expectation of violence and hillfort construction. However, it is clear that at other times enclosed sites defined meeting places or reflected the social status or aspirations of their architects/clients and that the impetus behind their construction could transform from one to the other.” (ibid 97)

Therefore we should generally be suspicious of simple “Defensive” interpretations. Whilst not denying that this could be true to some degree, even where it is there could be other important factors acting at the same time.

4.1.2 Trading spaces

Trade has been suggested for many promontory sites by many authors, but perhaps most cogently by Henderson (2007) and Cunliffe (2001). Toolis also made a case for trade at one of his Galloway sites - Isle head (2007 66), and Barker & Driver at one of their Welsh sites - Bosherton Camp (2011 81).

Cunliffe discusses the site of “Le Yaudet”, northern Brittany. Here is

“..a promontory of granite commanding an estuary at the point where the River Leguer reaches the sea. To the south west a long narrow inlet provides a perfect sheltered anchorage with easy access to the open sea, while on the other side of the promontory a bend in the river provides deep water close to the land”

The site was excavated and shown to have been

“..in continuous use from the Late Bronze Age, about 900-800BC. It was probably first defended at this time and was redefended on a more substantial scale some time about 100BC and two subsequent occasions before Caesar conquered the area in 56BC... The massive nature of the defences is a fair reflection of its local importance... Amongst the many thousands of sherds ...were vessels made in south-west Britain, probably Devon”

(ibid 66)

Across the channel, we have the historical site of “Ictis” mentioned by Diodorus Siculus (Hist. 5.1-4) in the 1st century BC – but who may have derived his information from the 3rd century BC Pytheas the Greek (Cunliffe 2001 76). Ictis was on a “promontory called Belerion” (identified as the Penwith peninsula Cornwall) and was used to trade Tin to merchants from the continent. It was a tidal island, to which Tin could be conveyed in wagons at low tide when “the sea recedes and leaves a large dry space and at that time they look like peninsulas”. Although the actual site could have been St Michaels Mount, Cunliffe favours the site of Mount Batten in Plymouth sound which has been excavated and shown to have appropriate deposits. Both have safe anchorage and access to Tin supplying areas, although Mount Batten has sheltered anchorages on both sides and easy access to the tin supplies via the River Tamar (Cunliffe 2001 78).

There are even comparable sites on the Isle of Lewis, albeit on a smaller scale. Only a kilometre or so south of Dunasbroc (section 3.1 above) there is a small promontory which lies half way between two townships, near a river and glen which reaches into the interior of the island. This was the site of a Market Cross or “Crois a’ Mhargaidh” on the 1st edition OS map below. The location, equidistant between two settlement areas and easily accessible to both, and to the inland via the nearby watercourse¹⁶, would seem to recall the importance of access noted in the above sites.

¹⁶ In Lewis, small rivers and their glens have flat bottoms which are generally a lot easier to walk than the heathery moor, which has bog and peat hags as well as deep heather



Figure 26: Crois a Margaidh (Market cross) half way between the townships of Galson and Dell, Isle of Lewis.
Image: National Library of Scotland



Figure 27: Crois a Margaidh, halfway between the townships of Galson and Dell.

At the other end of the scale, probably the biggest trading centre in the World is located upon the site of a promontory, with a barring, protective wall which looks a lot like a promontory fort – in fact it could definitely qualify as such in 1660 – see figure 27. The substantial defensive wall became the famous “Wall Street” we know today. The promontory lies at the confluence of the Hudson river with the Atlantic.



Figure 28: New York and Wall St. Re-drawn in 1916 (from an original in 1660) by John Wolcott Adams (1874-1925) and I.N. Phelps (1867-1944). Source: New York Historical Society Library, maps collection, public domain¹⁷

Westerdahl (1994) defines “Transport Zones”, which lie at right angles to the coast, and “local Zones” which lie in belts parallel to the coast. Parker (2001) also draws attention to Sherratt (1996) who defines subtly different “trans-isthmian routes” and “patterns of linkage between adjacent coastlines”. The contact points between these zones are termed “transit points” by Westerdahl. These are “The connections with waterways inland and the points where vessel or transportation methods change” (Westerdahl 1992 6). Both of these authors concepts seem highly relevant here - it would seem likely that the pre-requisites for a promontory trading site were its transport connections, and its status as a form of transition point.

Westerdahl notes that many “transit points” can develop into “Maritime Enclaves” such as port towns (1994, 1997). However, as Parker points out, these may also be completely free of structures, such as the lee of a *headland* where a ship can anchor and transfer goods to smaller craft (Parker, A.J. 2001 25, my emphasis).

In a related discussion, Cooney (2003 323) comments that

¹⁷ <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2081061>

“As in many other parts of the world, Maori communities marked out their fishing grounds and this was done from the sea, using prominent landmarks. It is the visually distinctive elements of the coastal topography, such as points or promontories and ridges or hills that are useful in this regard. Not surprisingly, these are often named and given ancestral significance and are used in defining and orally recounting lineage histories and rights of ownership.”

There must have been many places and times in which headlands and promontories were the actual border between two neighbouring coastal peoples. In this kind of geography, it is easy to imagine why these places might then become trading places, or annual meeting places.

The criteria for a promontory site being concerned with trade must be ease of access – it must be an easy for people to travel to from far and wide, both along the coast and inland using river courses. Also, they are all generally low lying. We could contrast with the likes of Burgi Geos, Shetland (Chapter 2), which is situated a long way from any cultivatable land, away from any possible through route and totally inaccessible from the sea due to being cliffbound. However, this easy access at promontory trading sites is then often barred by fortifications at the site itself. It is quite clear from figure 27 above that these local restrictions to access can appear very like fortifications, and may indeed have functioned as such in extremis.

4.1.3 Secular meeting places

Many authors suggest that some of these promontory sites might be used as secular meeting places. Perhaps one of the most convincing is Dun More, in County Kerry, Republic of Ireland. Dun More encompasses a huge 80 acres, the largest promontory fort in Ireland.



Figure 29: Dun More, Co. Kerry, Eire. After Gibbons & Gibbons 2004.

The defences consisted of an inner rampart, a ditch and a slighter outer bank, c500m long. These contained at least one well-defined entranceway at the terminus of a kilometre long relict road, which survived as a hollow way with flanking earthen banks and ran east ward (Gibbons and Gibbons 2004 10). The original date of the site's construction is still uncertain although an ogham-inscribed stone that was discovered on the highest point of the promontory was dated to the 6th century on linguistic grounds (ibid 10). No evidence of any surviving structures has been found within the rampart other than the presence of a souterrain somewhere on the site, now lost. This apparently contained another burial and a cross-inscribed stone. A monastic settlement is possible but thought unlikely due to the lack of any placename evidence (ibid 11). For these reasons:

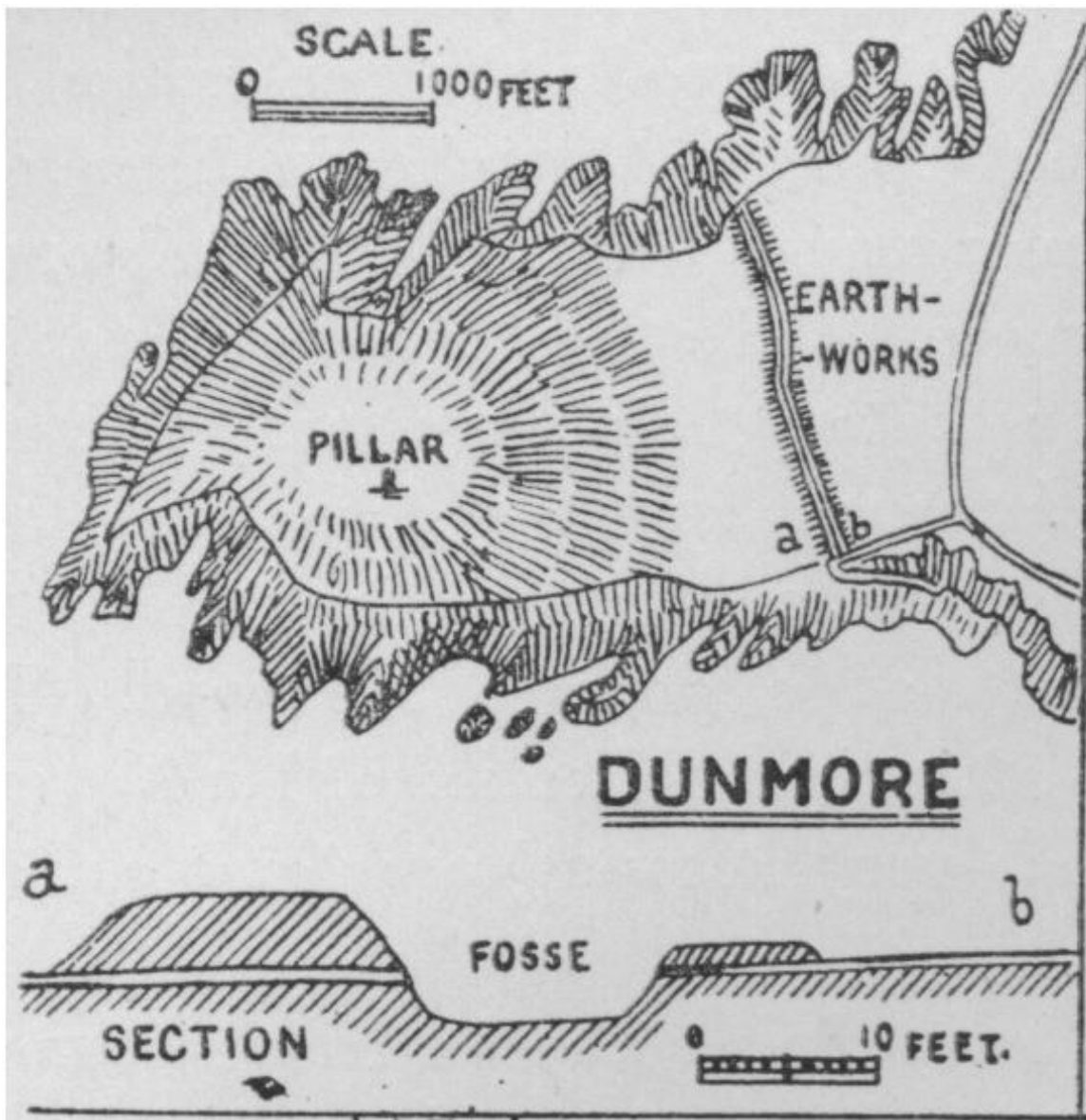


Figure 30: Dun More plan. After Thomas Johnson Westrop (1910)

“It may have acted as a venue where the population could be gathered to watch inaugurations, hear laws promulgated or render tribute (owed by all freemen) to their sovereign. The large

entranceway and the major roadway approaching the site would seem to suggest that, rather than simply being a local centre, Dunmore received large numbers of visitors. This would not necessarily have been a daily event but it does suggest that the site's importance was recognised outside its immediate area. It seems likely, then, that Dunmore was a secular assembly site, on an unparalleled scale, in a densely populated landscape which was in use in the Early Christian period..”

(Gibbons and Gibbons 2004 12)

This last point reminds us of one made in section 4.1.3 above – that headlands and promontories may well have served as border markers to many coastal communities, and therefore their liminal, in-between kind of nature may have meant that they made perfect places for annual gatherings from far and wide.

4.1.5 Agricultural

Burgess mentions “Agricultural enclosures” as one of his categories in chapter 2, although does not make it entirely clear if he meant to keep stock off the promontory or on it (Burgess 1999 102). Fieldwalking on the Isle of Lewis has indicated both uses of promontory sites – although on very different types of coastline.

There is a dyke and ditch stretching for almost 4 KM of along the east coast of Lewis, dug to stop animals falling off the tall cliffs in the area - Canmore Id: 335455; NGR: NB 51497 41970 but continues north). At times this cuts off small promontories.



Figure 31: c.4km long coastal ditch and bank/ turf dyke, Gress, Isle of Lewis. Image: Author

At the other end of the scale, we have a low lying promontory site on an island which is actually called a sheep pen on the latest OS maps.



Figure 32: Stock enclosure on Eilean Mor, Loch Orasaigh, Isle of Lewis. Image: courtesy of the Ordnance survey

Although this is a modern fenceline, it illustrates the point that in some circumstances a promontory can be used like this I am assured by local crofters that any kind of cliff bound promontory would never be used to enclose stock, for the obvious risk of them falling off.

This seems to illustrate perfectly why it is essential to be clear about what kind of landform we are referring to when we say “promontory”, and not lump all shapes which just look in plan like a promontory together.

4.1.6 Sacred space

There is one final use that promontories may have been put to, or seen as – sacred space. This is well evidenced, even in classical writings: the Mediterranean was full of “Sacred Capes” (Cunliffe 2001 89),

and Strabo refers to Cape St Vincent as the “Sacred Promontory” in his geographies (3.2.11), (quoted in Cunliffe 2001 59).

Parker (2001 35) notes that:

Mountains, especially with their crown of cloud, are excellent landfalls, often venerated with a shrine and seafarers’ offerings; in Britain, ancient geographers knew of a Promontorium Herculis in the Bristol Channel area, perhaps the steep, rocky Hartland Point (Devon), and distinguished among Romano-British placenames by its classical name, no doubt as it was known to visiting sailors (though ‘Hercules’ may stand for a native deity).

And also that

“In medieval Europe, landmark structures were quite frequently chapels or hermitages. Such, for example, are St Michael’s Chapel, Rame Head, on the western side of Plymouth Sound, or St Nicholas’ Chapel at Ilfracombe, perched on the rocky headland at the harbour entrance, which served as watch houses, and also lit a beacon or light at night, thus being the forerunners of lighthouses. This dedication of headlands and islets to saints in the Middle Ages, and the devotion to them of religious persons, may be an echo of older traditions (cf. on Hartland Point, above). (ibid 36)

However a sacred space does not necessarily need a structure to be sacred. As we saw in Chapter 2, Sharpe discusses what he sees as the sacred nature of the enclosed space at Treryn Dinas, Cornwall. Tilley & Bennet concur in their “Archaeology of Supernatural places” when they say of Treryn Dinas “If the Iron Age wall defended anything, it was these stones” (Tilley & Bennet 2001 359). Or, as Herring (1994: 54) puts it, these places were 'objects of display'.

Richard Bradley’s book “The Archaeology of natural places” shows how sacred space, known and used by many, does not require walled enclosure or indeed any kind of structure. The Saami of Finland have sites called “*siejddes*”, where they sacrifice and consume animals and deposit their bones and certain objects – both artefacts made of wood or metal and natural uncarved stones which for one reason or another are considered redolent of something. They were found at “striking features of the natural terrain... The main features to be treated in this way were (in descending order of frequency): hills and mountains, lakes, peninsulas, caves, islands, waterfalls and springs.” (Bradley 2000 5-6).

“One of the main purposes of sacrifice was to ensure a dependable food supply. Thus offerings were made to the divine masters of the animals and to the supernatural rulers of different regions of the landscape. This was done in order to obtain an abundance of reindeer, fish and birds. The offerings were also intended to protect the health and fertility of the reindeer and to avoid illnesses that seemed to emanate from underground, for this was regarded as the domain of the dead. The weather was important too, and other sacrifices were carried out to protect against lightning and to ensure that there was sufficient rain to nourish the grass and moss on which the animals depended for food. Other reasons for undertaking sacrifice included the need to propitiate elemental forces like the sun, the moon and the winds”

(Bradley 2000 and quoting Rydving 1995)

On the Isle of Lewis a curious ritual was practiced up until the 17th century at least which bears more than a passing similarity to these sacrifices. The people worshipped a sea goddess called “Shony” or Seonaidh, who provided “sea-wares” – sea weed - which was essential for fertilising the land and hence providing the staple cereal crop. Every year a brew of beer was made from these and the village

would assemble at the beach so that “one of their number” could wade out into the waves and pour the brew into the sea. A prayer was offered to the goddess and requests made for more seawares in the following year. The villagers did not return to their houses that night but all stayed out all night to finish the brew (Martin M, 1716 107). This reciprocal, ritual relationship with the sea was actually widespread throughout the west of Scotland, albeit taking slightly different forms in different places. A “hymn” recorded by Alexander Carmichael in his *Carmina Gaelica*, (Volume 1- 1900) originates in Iona:

*A dhe' na mara,
Cuir todhar'san tarraing –
Chon Tachair a talaimh,
Chon bailcidh dhuinn biadh.*

*Oh, god of the sea,
Put weed in the tide –
To enrich the ground,
To flood us with food.*

Carmichael, A, Carmina Gaedlica, Vol.1 1900

It should be noted that it was the storms and big swells which put weed in the tide, so this invocation to a Sea Goddess was also invoking the elements – and took place where these elements could be directly experienced. In Uig, Lewis, a blood libation was offered to a “god of the sea, so that this powerful deity would send abundance of fishes close to the shore” The ritual was known as “t-ainmean”, and was undertaken at the end of the summer, with the blood of the first animal slaughtered that season, collected in a vessel. In order to carry out the ritual, the protagonist “walked out to the extreme tip of the longest **peninsula** carrying the vessel of blood, and baring his head he said a weird incantation, poured out the sanguinary libation, and hoped Manaan Mac Lir would answer his request” (Macdonald, D, 1967, my emphasis). A very similar tradition is documented by John Gregorson Campbells’ “The Gaelic Otherworld” (Black, 2005) that of “Big Porridge Day” – if, at the last Thursday before Easter, the winter had not provided enough sea weed, a large pot of porridge was prepared “with butter and other good ingredients” and poured into the sea at **headlands** with “certain incantations or rhymes” (ibid,134, 548-549, 591, my emphasis). Campbell quotes many varied scholars in collating this information, and finds these rituals to gods or goddesses of the sea over a wide area of the islands in the west of Scotland, generally happening in spring, near Easter. He argues that Mannan Mac Lir and Shony/ Seonaidh are one and the same, Mannanan being Christianised into St. John the Baptist, through association with water and spring. Shony is a Gaelic version of the name John. How Martin, a Gaelic speaker, recorded Shony as a sea goddess remains unknown. Then we have Maundy Thursday: according to Gaelic dictionary, Am Faclair Beag, “*DiarDaoin a' bhrochain mhóir*”, “was at one time a custom in the Long Island, if the usual drift of seaweed were behind time, to go on Maundy Thursday and pour an oblation of gruel on a **promontory**, accompanying the ceremony by the repetition of a certain rhyme” (accessed 01/11/21).

These activities have obvious relevance to the sites in Lewis described in Chapter3. Could they have been ancient antecedents of such rituals? Burning sacrifices for the whole community perhaps?

On the archipelago of Hiort, St Kilda, there are a number of simple drystone Altars set up in natural places, apparently focused upon the immense natural forces they must witness – see figure 32 below. These were first mentioned by MacAulay in 1764. He refers to four altars that had been used by the

“ancient St Kildans”, including one upon the hill *Mullach Geal* that was dedicated to the god of weather (see also Harman 1997 74).



Figure 33: The Altar on Soay, St Kilda, with Boreray in the background. Image: Author, courtesy of the National Trust for Scotland.

The Altar on Soay is on a shoulder of the summit plateau which juts out into the near vertical sides of the island like a promontory – you could say it is somewhere inbetween an inland promontory and a coastal promontory. It has the footings of a rough low wall which seems to enclose the area. This promontory enclosure faces the rest of the archipelago – although only Boreray and the Stacks are visible in the above figure, the rest are just to the right of shot – see fig 33 below.



Figure 34: The Altar on Soay, St Kilda with Hirte in the background. Image: Author, courtesy of the National Trust for Scotland.

These sites also seem to bear more than a passing resemblance to Richard Bradley's Saami examples.



Figure 35: A "Siejddes", or Saami sacrificial site, as depicted by Johannes Schefferus 1673. After Bradley 2000.

Peter Herring said about the cliff castles of West Penwith: "Certainly the spirits of earth, water and air are all close at hand on a stormy day among these great rocks" (Herring 1994). Helms wrote "they have a particular character as sacred, special places because they are where the land, sea and sky conjoin (Helms 1988: 25).

Promontories were also considered a suitable place for burying the dead in the Neolithic. In Orkney, Tim Phillips noticed that many Neolithic Chambered Tombs were placed upon prominent headlands or on small offshore islands (Phillips 2003 375-380), and, as Sharples noted above in section 1.2.3, many Orcadian iron age Brochs are built upon Neolithic Chambered Tombs, situated upon promontories (Sharples 2006). This happens to be echoed in Morbihan, France. According to Scarre "A striking element of the passage grave distribution is the location of many significant cairns not only within the coastal zone but on headlands or islands along the shoreline itself, or overlooking the sea edge" (Scarre 2002 3). He suggests that "headlands and islands may in this context be regarded as places especially appropriate for the disposal of human (or ancestral remains), since these are locations on the edge of the land, backed by open sea" (Scarre 2002 3)

Many of these sites may have been sacred natural places which have been embellished over time. First might be a simple demarcation of space, a low wall or ditch. At this stage this structure is not even about restricting access – simply letting everyone know there is a sacred space. But these structures can grow. Richards Employs the term "wrapping" to describe certain architectures: "Architecture can be a mode of wrapping ... the possibility exists that the practice and method of

wrapping a thing or place can, under certain circumstances, be of greater consequence than what is actually being concealed” (Richards, C. 2013 17). These processes might have resulted in something which looks like a fort but was originally a sacred space: if a space became special, and then owned, then maybe it could have been fought over, and hence eventually protected. Over time, these places could have been wrapped, their ancient sacred power appropriated to bolster new claims of social power, culminating in what we call a fort.

4. 2 Conclusions

A promontory site might be all of these things or combinations thereof, or may be none of them. The list was not exhaustive and is mainly designed to show that the term “Promontory Fort” is misleading if it is to be the only term we can use for a site in such a place. We need to acknowledge the richness of the archaeology in such places and not shoe horn it all into a single term. But also, we need to not see everything in terms of warfare. There is clearly a lot more going on, and this over-use of militaristic language means we miss other sides of our prehistory.

To return to the initial quote about “the proper names”, perhaps we could suggest a new taxonomy of archaeological sites situated upon promontories. To start with, if these sites were termed “promontory sites” rather than “promontory forts” then we would not be interpreting them before we look at the evidence. We could then, after looking in detail at the location as well as the available archaeological evidence, suggest a primary use, whilst acknowledging that other uses may be running concurrently.

It is notable how rich the archaeology of promontory sites seem to be - they are well used places. They may have always been special places to us. After all, in terms of describing a sea journey to someone else, or carrying out a sea journey, they are fundamental. In this way they have probably played an important role in the development of Western Europe since people first explored the Atlantic coast.

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