

BROCHS AND GALLERIED DUNS

by Alison Blackwood

Brochs are unique to Scotland, found mainly in the North and West but with regional variations - architecture of the Atlantic Iron Age. They are free standing hollow-walled circular constructions with fairly constant dimensions and specific architectural features. The five great classical broch towers are Mousa, Shetland, Carloway, Lewis, Dun Dornaigil, Sutherland, Dun Troddan and Dun Telve, Glenelg. They have a massive wall base in relation to the area enclosed. Two concentric dry-stone walls bonded together by horizontal stone lintels at around 2 m. intervals, achieving a series of galleries and allowing for an intramural staircase accessed from within the building.

The gap between the walls is about 1m or less, and narrows with height. This is the means by which they can achieve considerable height. A scarcement (a projecting stone feature or slot that timber floors and rafters could be fixed to) is often seen on the inner wall face. Post holes have been found to indicate internal wooden fittings. The narrow entrance has a low passage roofed with lintels. The front lintel can be impressive, sometimes triangular in shape, supporting the outer shell of the wall, diverting the weight to either side of the passageway as at Caisteal Grugaig, Totaig, Lochalsk. There can be one or two door-checks, and sometimes a chamber or guard cell within the walls entered from the central area. Some brochs are solid based with the double wall and galleries starting at about 2m as at Dun Telve, Glenelg. A feature for either lightening the load, or perhaps ventilation, is the presence of vertical rows of spaces over the lintels of interior doorways (see Figures).

In Shetland, where brochs have survived well, the outside diameter is between 16-25m, the inner diameter between 7-15m and surviving examples reach 13m in height. To assess the original height of a denuded prehistoric ruin, necessarily has an element of guesswork. They may not have been towers but lower walled defended farmsteads. The site at Gurness, Orkney, with its surrounding sequence of buildings, has been described as a defended village with a tower. The flat productive lands of Orkney, and Caithness with their excellent sandstone for building differ greatly from the mountainous west coast, with poorer building stone, isolated and limited patches of level land and little depth of soil. There are marked differences between the brochs of the North and the West. In the North, the brochs are sited in open countryside and tend to be solid based and more massive, with the proportions of wall to enclosed space greater than in the ground galleried, smaller, lighter structures of the west, that



Dun Telve, Glenelg. The entrance is on the left with a recess in the wall to one side that has been interpreted as a possible guard cell. Note spaces in the wall above the entrance and elsewhere, perhaps to lighten the load on the doorway lintel and/or provide added ventilation. Photo: R. Harvey



Dun Telve, Glenelg. Note the variety of stone used in the wall and the slabs tying the walls together. Photo: R. Harvey

Classification of brochs, galleried duns and duns by structural detail requires a degree of preservation. It does not allow for regional diversity, nor adaptation to the terrain, as in their location on stacks and ridges. Field survey cannot record what is hidden, nor excavation interpret missing superstructure with any accuracy. None of this spoils the enjoyment of searching out the remains of these interesting structures, noting the sites they chose (often the summit of a coastal knoll with lovely views) looking for signs of early land use and trying to imagine how the occupants lived. If they were the prestigious homes of their time, where was the rest of the population living?

Suggested Bibliography

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