

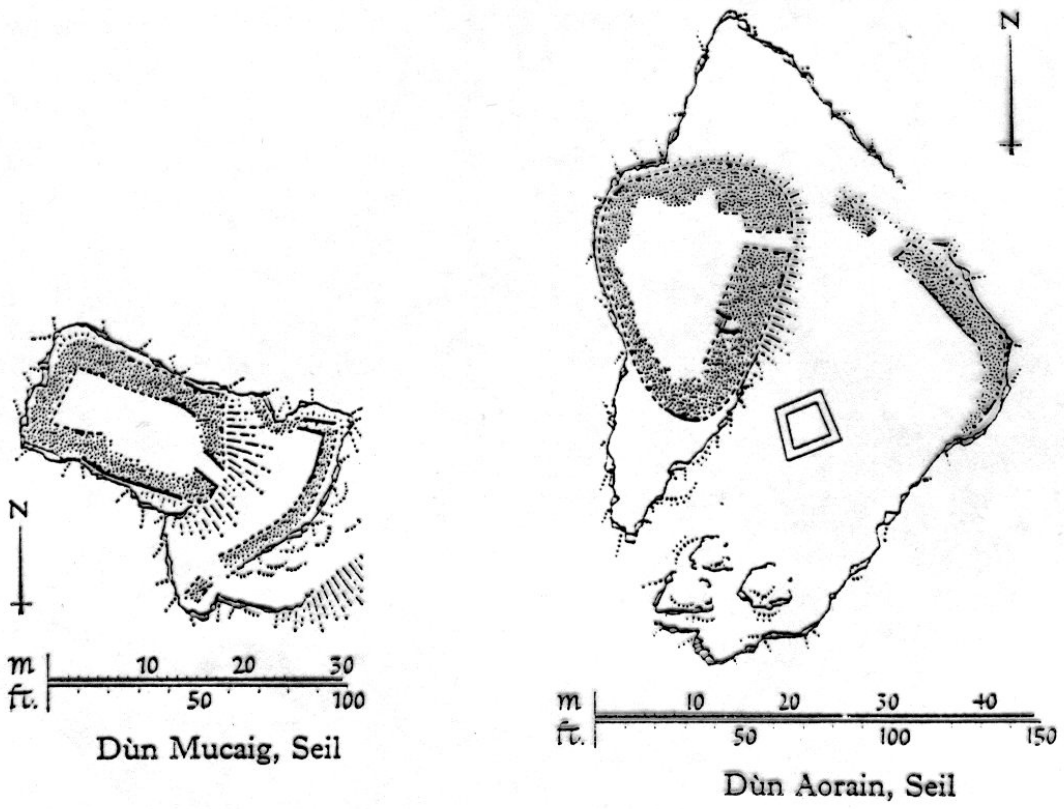
## **Dun Roamin'**

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The field excursion I was asked to lead on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2007 wandered in bright sunshine from the small promontory in front of Ellenabeich School on which the site of Dun Aorain sits, along the rocky foreshore to Dun Mucaig and then inland to visit the fort at Cnoc an Tigh Mhoir. On the way we passed various caves at the base of the cliffs that loom over the current shore, some of which include evidence for human activity. Without excavation it isn't possible to determine the age of this activity, nor whether this represents occupation rather than goings-on during the quarrying that evidently took place all along the coastline. By lucky happenstance it is quite probable that the route took the tour back in time, although the dating of some of the sites is based on analogy rather than direct evidence.

Dun Aorain (NMRS No.: NM71NW 1, Map ref NM 7475,1717) is a scheduled ancient monument, protected by Historic Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Ministers, which sits on a rocky promontory adjacent to a shingle beach. On the Argyllshire 1873 1:2,500 and the 1900 1:10,560 maps this shingle bar has not been created, and the site thus sat at the Ocean's edge, adjacent to a relatively sheltered embayment. It has always had the same triangular profile, and this, coupled with its location and the evidence for an intramural stair in the east wall discovered during a small-scale excavation by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) in 1970, suggests comparisons with the more fully excavated site on the Kintyre peninsula further south at Kildonan Bay (NR72NE 5, NR 7806,2778). The latter, investigated by H Fairhurst in the 1930s and E Peltenburg in the 1970s and 80s, is dated to the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD on the basis of finds and radiocarbon dates. The finds recovered from the RCAHMS excavations certainly wouldn't contradict this dating, and, considering the scale of intervention hinted at, were positively copious! A few crumbs of coarse pottery, a crude slate disc and an anvil-stone (DES 1970, pg 64) along with shell-midden in the intramural stair are comparable to similar finds on drystone monuments of this date in Argyll. The site itself sports a reasonably well-preserved wall on its east side, probably representing an

enhanced natural bank, but standing to a height of at least 3m above the level interior, with several courses of stonework visible on the south side. The entrance to the east is a narrow passage through the massively broad wall, in some places over 5m thick, leading to a lower external area bounded on the north by an outwork wall, itself sporting a narrow entrance. The provision of these outworks and annexes is relatively commonplace on drystone sites of all shapes and sizes in Argyll.



Dun Mucaig and Dun Aorain

Dun Mucaig (NM71NE 8, NM 7515,1541), another scheduled ancient monument, lies further round the coast to the south, on land owned by Kilbride Farm, and when walking this foreshore visitors should always follow the Scottish outdoor access code, and ensure gates are closed or left open as they are found and dogs are kept under control. The site itself is spectacular, and my favourite archaeological site in Argyll. It sits on a tall rock stack, which, even on the Argyllshire 1875 1:10,560 map is depicted as separated from the adjacent tall cliffs, towering at least 30m above the shoreline.

The site is basically rectangular in outline, following the general layout of the stack itself, with well-preserved wall faces visible to at least eight courses on its external north-east corner. The interior of the site, within the well-preserved walls, is distinctly divided into two separate areas by the internal wall faces constricting slightly about half way into the building. A narrow entrance on the short east gable leads down to a lower external annex, itself bounded by a well-preserved low wall with a narrow entrance leading to a steep access up the east side of the stack. Although never excavated this site is comparable to several others in Argyll and beyond, and particularly the excavated site at Dun Fhinn (NR63SE 10, NR 6572,3064), again further south on the west side of Kintyre, which sits on a similar, but lower, isolated rock stack. This latter was excavated in the 1960s by W F L Bigwood and was dated on the basis of recovered artefacts to the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD during its primary occupation, with a much later secondary occupation suggested to have been medieval. The location of Dun Fhinn, on its rock stack, is very similar to that of Dun Mucaig, rising above the shoreline and backed by low cliffs. In front of Dun Mucaig there is a natural harbour called Port nam Faoileann, now with a slate-built jetty provided for the quarrying operations nearby, and it is difficult to get away from the fact that both Dun Aorain and Dun Mucaig are strategically located immediately adjacent to the Atlantic Ocean routes that would have been the motorway of the time. Both have a natural harbour adjacent, suggesting that the occupants either owned boats or were regularly visited by maritime traffic, and both have extensive views south and west. Both also look across the mouth of a Sound, the former to Easdale Sound between Seil and Easdale, the latter to the Cuan Sound between Seil and Luing.

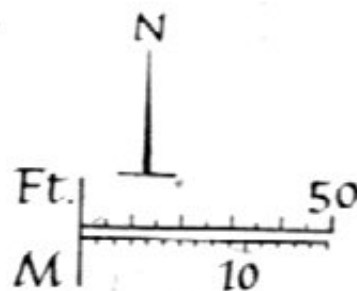
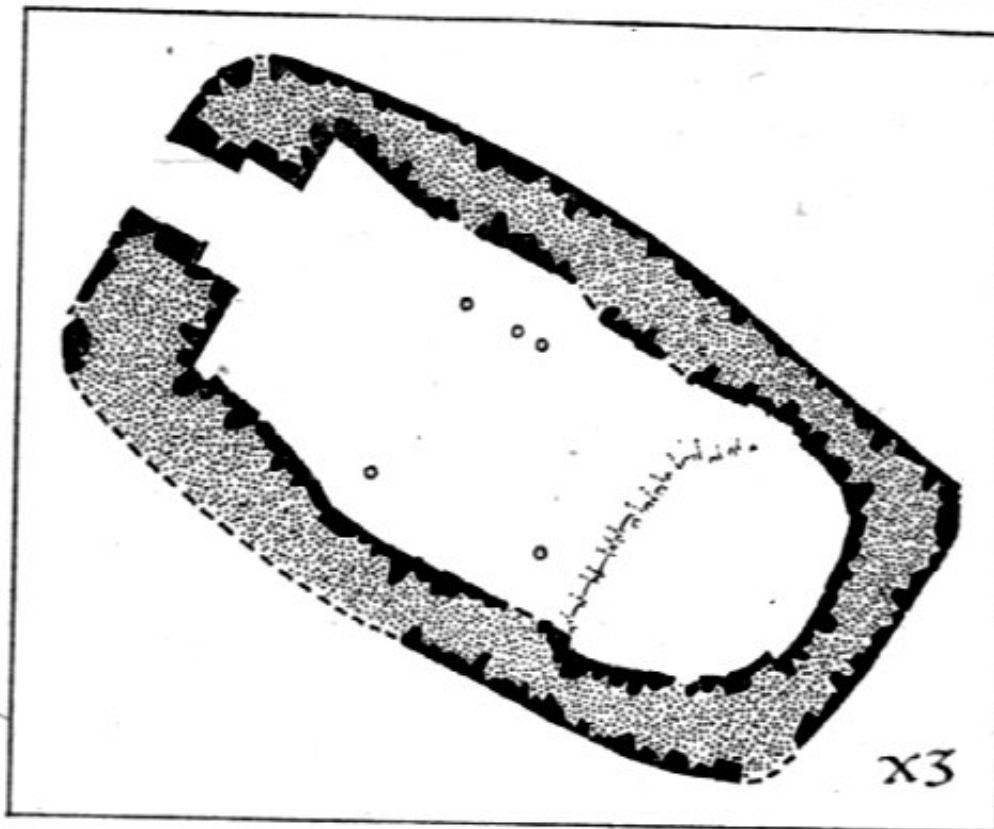


Fig. 78. Dun, Dùn Fhinn (No. 203);  
after W. F. L. Bigwood

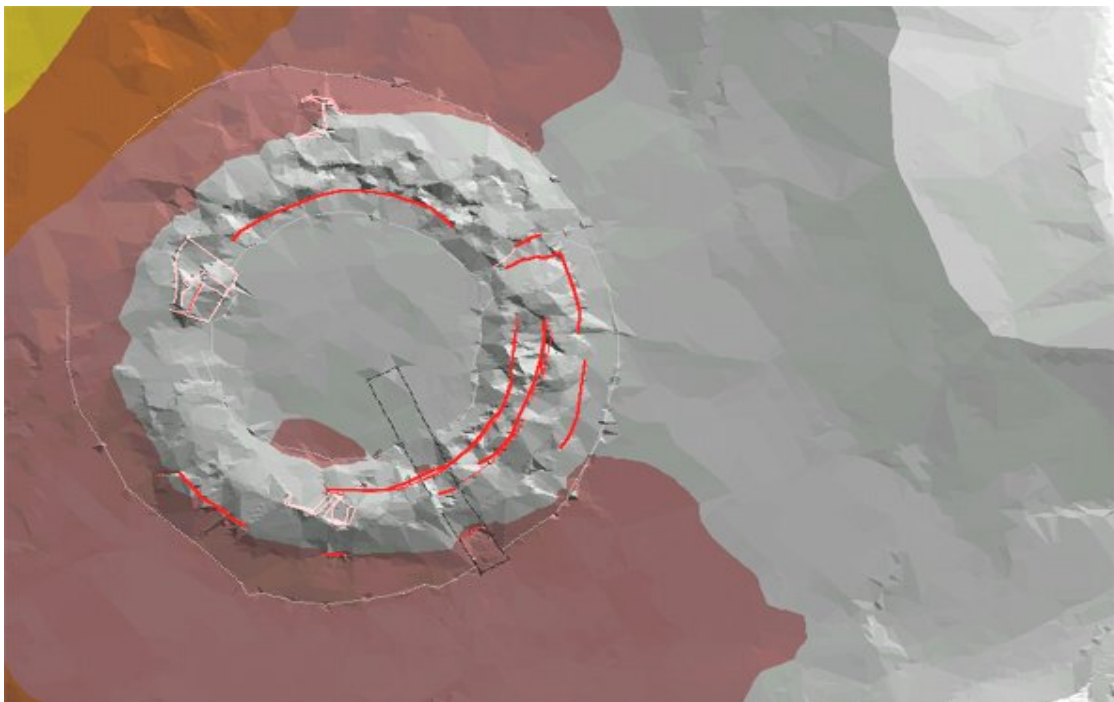
### Dun Fhinn

The party then followed a small stream north, up a ravine between the tall cliffs, inland towards the farm at Kilbride. To the south of the farm sits Cnoc an Tighe Mhoir (NM71NE 9, NM 7569,1634), a rectangular fort sitting on a low hill with a stone wall that may not have a surviving original entrance. Recent examination of this site by the author has recovered vitrified stone in sheep scrapes and rabbit burrows, also visible on the day of the visit, which suggests

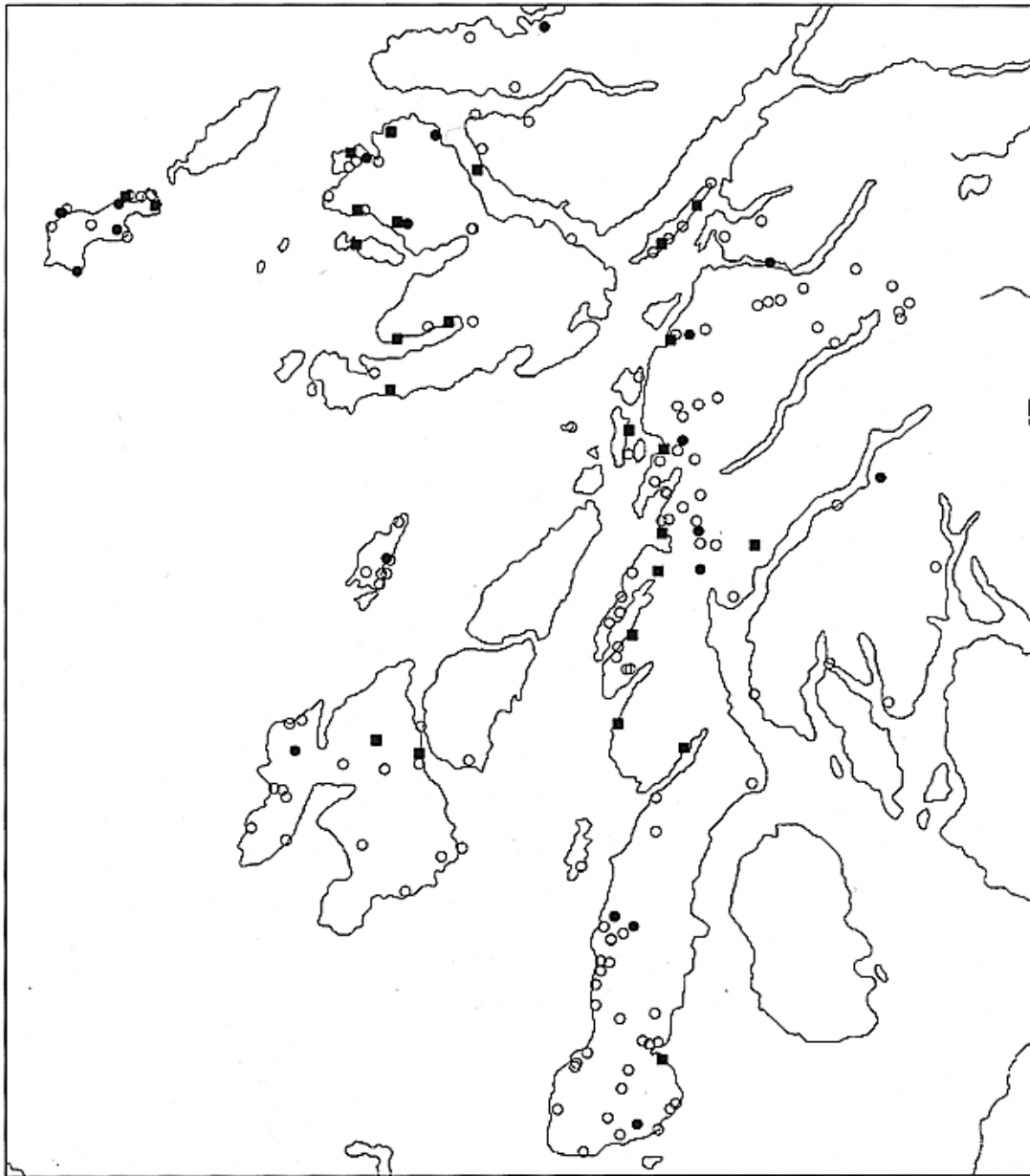
that the site was destroyed by fire, and therefore may have had timber laced walls. Interestingly, there are other vitrified forts in Scotland with rectangular plans and no discernable entrance, and so the lack of one here may be real, although excavation would be necessary to discern whether the gaps visible today really do represent more recent agricultural activity. These other vitrified forts have generally provided prehistoric dates, although some later, generally 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD, sites are also known to have timber lacing in their walls. The vitrified site in Ardnamurchan further north, called Rahoy (NM65NW 2, NM 6330,5644), provided very good evidence for an early Iron Age date, from artefacts excavated by V G Childe and W Thorneycroft in the 1930s; however, it was a very different small circular type of site. The vitrified ramparts at Duntroon in Kilmartin (NR89NW 10, NR 8029,9597) were also dated to the prehistoric period on discovery of saddle querns from this site. The ramparts at Cnoc an Tighe Mhoir on this day provided very adequate seating for the party to rest in the sun and have lunch.

The three sites visited provide a fascinating cross section of the variability of drystone monuments in Argyll, ranging from the largish vitrified fort, located inland on a low hill, through the odd shaped Dun Aorain to the small rectangular Dun Mucaig. The only missing type of site is the stone-built roundhouse, now known to academics as Atlantic roundhouses, represented by sites like Rahoy. My own research has suggested that these latter were the predominant and typical site of the prehistoric Iron Age, from about 500BC to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, these are then followed by a period up to about the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD during which either these were re-used, often for smaller cellular settlement or simpler secondary roundhouses, alongside the introduction of the rectangular buildings like Dun Mucaig on new sites. There are then a series of slightly larger, often odd-shaped, drystone buildings like Dun Aorain that appear from the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD, again on new sites, and continue in use to the end of the millennium at least, perhaps alongside the rectangular structures and even the cellular re-use of the older roundhouses. The development of Iron Age sites is no doubt complex, and doesn't and shouldn't fit any simplistic typological progression. The fascinating discovery of timber roundhouses on Skye reported in issue 56 of Scottish Archaeological News published in Spring 2008 by the Council for Scottish

Archaeology (soon to be known as Archaeology Scotland), suggests a landscape populated by different building types. Skye was previously better known for its drystone roundhouses, however, these timber buildings in addition to the proliferation of forts such as Cnoc an Tighe Mhoir or Dun Ormidale outside Oban (NM82NW 15, NM 8290,2630), indicate that a range of site types were in use during the Iron Age. What were all these structures for? They were probably not all for the same use, or built by the same people, and perhaps some were not built in the Iron Age at all. The discovery of over 30 saddle querns at the vitrified fort at Duntroon suggests a very specific use, while other sites were probably the typical home of the population. Recent radiocarbon dating of contexts in the large circular drystone site at Loch Glashan (NR99SW 8, NR 9227,9301) suggest that it dates to the Iron Age, in the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC but without modern excavation accompanied by similar scientific dating techniques across a range of sites there is still a vast amount we do not know about the drystone sites in Argyll.



Dun Glashan 3D survey



### Distribution of Atlantic Roundhouses in Argyll

Key - solid squares: complex Atlantic roundhouses, solid circles: possible complex Atlantic roundhouses, open circles: simple Atlantic roundhouses.