

## *Archaeological Context of Borralie, Durness*

Before the 2001 survey carried out by GUARD (see below) and the 2004 season of the Strathnaver Province Archaeology Project, archaeologists had carried out some research in the area around Durness. A limited survey of the headland centred on Loch Borralie took place in 1966 (Reid et al 1968) and highlighted the significant quantities of prehistoric monuments here and an apparent relationship between the concentrations of hut circles and limestones. The Sutherland Coastal Survey, carried out on behalf of Historic Scotland in 1997, examined the headland's coastal fringe (Brady & Morris 1998). In 2000, on behalf of Historic Scotland, GUARD undertook the rescue excavation of two burials in a multi-phased, sub-rectangular cairn to the west of Loch Borralie. One of the skeletons was radiocarbon dated to 40 cal BC – cal AD 210 (OxA-10253) (MacGregor 2003).

A baseline survey carried out on the headland in 2001 (Lelong & MacGregor 2003; 2004) recorded approximately 200 archaeological monuments, ranging from extensive prehistoric hut-circle settlements and cairnfields to isolated shieling huts, burial cairns and field walls. Many of these were discovered eroding out of deflated areas in the fixed dunes. In addition to sites 46 and 89 (excavated in 2004), several other archaeological features of possible Norse or Medieval date were identified. In a broad valley running down to the Kyle of Durness, a small sandblow revealed a short length of walling with an associated old ground surface eroding out beside it (site 21). This may have been a metal-working site. During the baseline survey, pieces of slag, sherds of probable Norse pottery and a small charm or pendant, made of a quartzite pebble in a copper-alloy setting, were collected from the eroding surface. When the site was visited in July 2003 it had been destroyed by the collapse of the deflating section above it.

A striking number of small, isolated, circular or oval structures were recorded on the high rim of ground along the western part of the survey area. These could be shieling structures, perhaps dating from a period when the flocks of the Bishop of Caithness were grazed here in summer (Mackay 1906, 37). They do suggest that the headland's grassy expanses were occupied on some temporary, seasonal basis in the past.

Over the past several decades, numerous artefacts have been collected from the surface of deflated areas by local people. During the baseline survey, these were catalogued and their locations were recorded wherever possible. They include several copper alloy frustum-headed pins of Medieval date, pieces of late Medieval metalwork, and an amber bead, concentrated in the vicinity of structure 89. Sherds of later prehistoric pottery, worked bone, industrial waste, spindle whorls, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century coins and post-Medieval buttons and pottery have also been picked up both in this area and elsewhere on the headland. They hint at the dense and potentially continuous or continual occupation of the headland from later prehistory onward.

It is likely that the headland saw Norse settlement, given its fertility, its proximity to the sea and the place name and archaeological evidence. The area around Durness contains a large number of place names that are Norse in origin, including Durness itself ('deer point'), Keoldale ('cold valley') and Smoo ('inlet') (Waugh 2000). The place name 'Borralie' may derive from the Old Norse *borg-* for houses clustered around a fort or monastic site and *-ley*, probably the plural of meadow (Johnston 1934, 12; Darwood 1995). The name most likely refers to a dun (site 123 in Lelong & MacGregor 2003) which is perched on a small headland overlooking the loch, around which cluster later, eighteenth-century township buildings.

Archaeological evidence for Viking/Norse activity in northern Sutherland is sparse in comparison to that in Caithness or Orkney, but much of what is known has been found in the vicinity of Durness. A single, ninth- or tenth-century burial of a young male was found in the dunes at Balnakeil Bay (Low, Batey & Gourlay 2000), and another possible burial is known from Keoldale, less than a kilometre to the south of Loch Borralie (Batey 1993). A ninth- to twelfth-century midden excavated in a small cave off Smoo Inlet is thought to have been left by Norse sailors using the inlet for shelter (Pollard forthcoming). At Sangobeg, the largely eroded remains of a Late Norse settlement were excavated and found to overlie a pre-Christian burial (Brady, Lelong & Batey in prep).

However, here as elsewhere in the northern Highlands, substantial archaeological evidence for Norse or Medieval rural settlement is conspicuously elusive (Lelong 2003). One of the main aims of the Strathnaver Province Archaeological Project is to investigate those sites in the former province with the highest potential for yielding Medieval archaeology and to refine our methodologies for locating Medieval settlement remains in the region.

---

Batey, C.E. 1993 'The Viking and Late Norse Graves of Caithness and Sutherland.' In Batey, C.E., Jesch, J. & Morris, C.D. (eds.), *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 148-72.

Brady, K.B. & Morris, C..D. 1998 Sutherland Coastal Survey. University of Glasgow Department of Archaeology Report.

Brady, K.B., Lelong, O. & Batey, C. in prep Excavations at Sangobeg, Sutherland.

Darwood, D 1995 *Scotland's Place-Names*. The Mercat Press; Edinburgh.

Johnston, J B 1934 *The Place Names of Scotland*. John Murray, London.

Lelong, O. & MacGregor, G. 2003 *Loch Borrallie, Kyle of Durness: An Archaeological Survey*. GUARD Report 950.

Lelong, O. & MacGregor, G. 2004 'Gallant Country of Corn: Making sense of a multi-period landscape on the Kyle of Durness, Sutherland.' In E. Carver & O. Lelong (eds.), *Modern Views – Ancient Lands: New Work and Thought on Cultural Landscapes*. Oxford: Archaeopress.

Low, D.M., Batey, C.E. & Gourlay, R. 2000 'A Viking Burial at Balnakeil, Sutherland.' In Baldwin (ed.) 2000, 24-34.

MacGregor, G 2003 'Excavation of an Iron Age burial mound, Loch Borrallie, Durness, Sutherland.' *Scottish Archaeological Internet Reports*.

MacKay, A 1906 *The Book of MacKay*. Edinburgh: Norman MacLeod.

Pollard, T forthcoming 'The Excavation of Four Caves in the Geodha Smoo, Durness.' *Scottish Archaeological Internet Review*.

Reid, R W K, David, G & Aitken, A 1968 'Prehistoric Settlement in Durness', in *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* (1966-67), 21-53.

Waugh, D 2000 A Scattering of Norse Names in Strathnaver. In Baldwin, J R (ed) *The Province of Strathnaver*. Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 13-23.