

EXCAVATIONS AT ACHNACLOICH, SLEAT, ISLE OF SKYE ..... APRIL 1990

Excavations were carried out for a period of three weeks, allowing fifteen working days on site and three field trips (to Strathaird, Dunvegan and Trotternish and Caradal (Sleat) respectively). Nineteen students participated, four for the first half of the season and thirteen for the full period. Those participating were: \*Koral Ahmet, Keith Atkins, Lizzie Craft, Anita Dey, Jonathan Farmer, Leon Galler, \*Ian Gough, Kit Hearn, Alison Hodgson, Seth Hopkins, Adrian Moss, Jonathan Roose, Jonathan Rubery, Tom Sheldon, Richard Stonecliffe, Ilona Torr, Ian Veater, Greg White and Jonathan Wilson. (\* Joint assistant directors).

The diary shows that on six days only half a day could be worked on site, and it cannot be denied that the worst April weather in Sleat in living memory had its effect on progress and on the programme of work which could be carried out. Credit is indeed due to the staff for enduring such adverse conditions, with only four or five good days, the advent of a four-day anticyclone giving cloudless skies on the very last day, good for site photography but too late to be of help otherwise. The main result of the bad weather, with continued waterlogged conditions, was that it seemed best, half way through the season, to switch much of the effort to the excavation of the croft house in Site A, known before from very limited probes, where bracken grows in summer and the ground is less sodden, with hardly any peat. The corollary of this was that the excavation of the interior of Site C, the southern hut circle first discovered in 1988, was postponed. Perhaps the use of planks might have made this possible, though conditions for recording would have been bad: this technique will be employed in the future, if required. Alternative programmes will be designed for the hoped-for 1991 season, depending on weather and above all on the state of the ground. Much remains to be done, though the excavation of the interior of Site B and of Site C will require at least reasonably dry conditions.

This report will summarize the discoveries and conclusions of the 1990 season, rather than giving a day-by-day account of the work, which would involve much repetition. Any evidence gained about these round structures -- "hut circles" for short -- will be of significance, since these are the first buildings of their kind to be excavated anywhere in Skye. The attempt to secure sound carbon samples for radiocarbon dating was not wholly successful, since no wood/charcoal from remains of either of the structures, e.g. ~~pe~~ from post-holes, has yet been found. Samples from peat fires could give misleadingly high dates, but may prove to be all that is obtainable. The strong probability remains, however, that these hut circles date to the Bronze Age. As yet no traces of burial cairns or middens have been found. As for traces of cultivation, a very ruined field bank just east of Site C could be contemporary, as likewise a ditch found in a twenty-metre-long trial trench (TT 2) extending east from Site B; but this latter remains to be further clarified in drier conditions. The same applies to an extension east of Site C, where again there seems to be a trace of a drainage ditch. Certainly it would have its uses there.

To find two hut circles thus close together is itself unusual for Skye, since they are normally sited quite far apart from one another. This is true, for examples, of three hut circles near Loch Baravaig, east of the junction of the road from Ord with the main Armadale-Broadford road. Two of the hut circles were found by a team of three students from our group, making a reconnaissance of the Baravaig area: the third is already marked on the maps.

The excavation of the entire hut circle of Site B revealed undoubted evidence of the entrance, on the favourable north-east segment. This might not have been observed but for the fact that a line of stones marking a wall outside the hut circle itself could be seen to continue on through the thickness of the perimeter of the hut circle. There are some paving stones just outside the entrance, with a line of stones across, seemingly a threshold. Less certain is the possibility of three short partitions running in towards the centre of the hut circle, where the bedrock is partly exposed, in the area where one would expect the main hearth. The sector exposed in 1989 revealed three likely postholes and a small internal

enclosure, perhaps some sort of storage bin. Further investigation of Site B must involve very careful removal of clearly tumbled stones, in an attempt to discover whether or not there is any indication of an inside face to the perimeter wall. Some traces of external structures were uncovered, and a hearth outside the hut circle yielded some charcoal. In between the stones of the east segment was found a small fragment of a finger-ring, of chalcedonic stone of the jasper-agate family. I am indebted to Mr. David Bursill, of Achnacloich, formerly a photographic technician of the Geological Laboratory in the University of Cambridge, for this identification. Though resembling amber at first sight, it is certainly stone.

While work inside Site C hut circle was thought to be very inadvisable in the wet conditions, an extension was made to the east, as well as uncovering of more of the orange-red burnt surface in the south-west corner of Site C, where it had first been found in 1988, just beneath the modern ground surface. In the last two days of the excavations a small trial trench (Site E) was opened just south of the small burn, which runs south of Site C. Here, with a ridge of bedrock at one end of the trench, stones were found at the other end, on lower ground, close to an area of intensive cultivation in the past, with the usual rig-and-furrow. More interesting was the exposure again here of the familiar orange-red burnt layer. More work needs to be done here. Use of a Russian auger, with tube, might yield worthwhile data on the extent of this burnt layer.

The other main effort was in Site A, chosen for its drier conditions, where the plan of a post-medieval croft house was exposed. Inside it was a later feature, resembling some kind of bin, on whose possible function comments will be very welcome. Its stones rest on a foot of soil above the pebbly surface forming the floor of the main building, distinguished by its good stonework forming the inside face. The plan is more a parallelogram than a rectangle. The narrow doorway is in the south wall. There are only intermittent traces of any outside wall face, this surely being explicable by the tradition of piling stones as a base to the massive earth and turf embankment that was an integral part of such houses. This feature was found also in Site C (Level I) in the original excavations of 1988. In addition there are many tumbled stones fallen from the walls. Part of the north wall had been robbed out, the large stones then being thrown carelessly on the overlying soil. The section on the north side of the excavations does suggest, though it cannot in any way prove, a date for the main house no later and perhaps earlier than the eighteenth century. A small, intact glass bottle could be contemporary with the later feature, being found in the soil outside and above the main house, which had an enclosure to the north. There is evidence suggesting the presence of an earlier building phase, though not enough to justify removal of the main building to find it. The floor of the main building clearly rest on stones in its south-west sector, forming a terrace.

It is hoped that there can be another season of excavations in April 1991, whose programme will depend of course on the weather! Meanwhile limited investigations will, if possible and weather permitting, be carried out in Site B at least this summer, most probably in the second half of July.

CHARLES BURNEY.

April 1990.