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# Norse by Northwest: pursuing Scandinavian settlement on Coll and Tiree

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This dissertation is submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MLitt in Archaeology at the University of Glasgow

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## **Abstract**

Insight into the Norse colonisation of the Inner Hebrides is hindered by a marked lack of archaeology. Despite extensive research emphasising the extent of Scandinavian influence in place-names and land management, the islands of Tiree and Coll have yet to be subject to rigorous archaeological enquiry pertaining to Viking-Age settlement. As such, these islands serve as an ideal case study to highlight the imbalance of perspectives regarding Norse settlement across Scotland's coastal zones.

Coll and Tiree are placed at the heart of a maritime network spanning the western coast of Scotland, with links stretching to Norway and the Irish Sea. The character of Norse contacts and settlement form is assessed using a wide range of approaches, demonstrating an assertive process of land valuation with little redistribution of preceding site patterns. The islands are placed in context within both the locale of the Inner Hebrides, and wider Western Isles.

## **Acknowledgements**

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**Cover:** Boat stem from Skuldelev 3. Roskilde, Denmark © Vikingskibsmuseet

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ON = Old Norse

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## Norse by Northwest: pursuing Scandinavian settlement on Coll and Tiree

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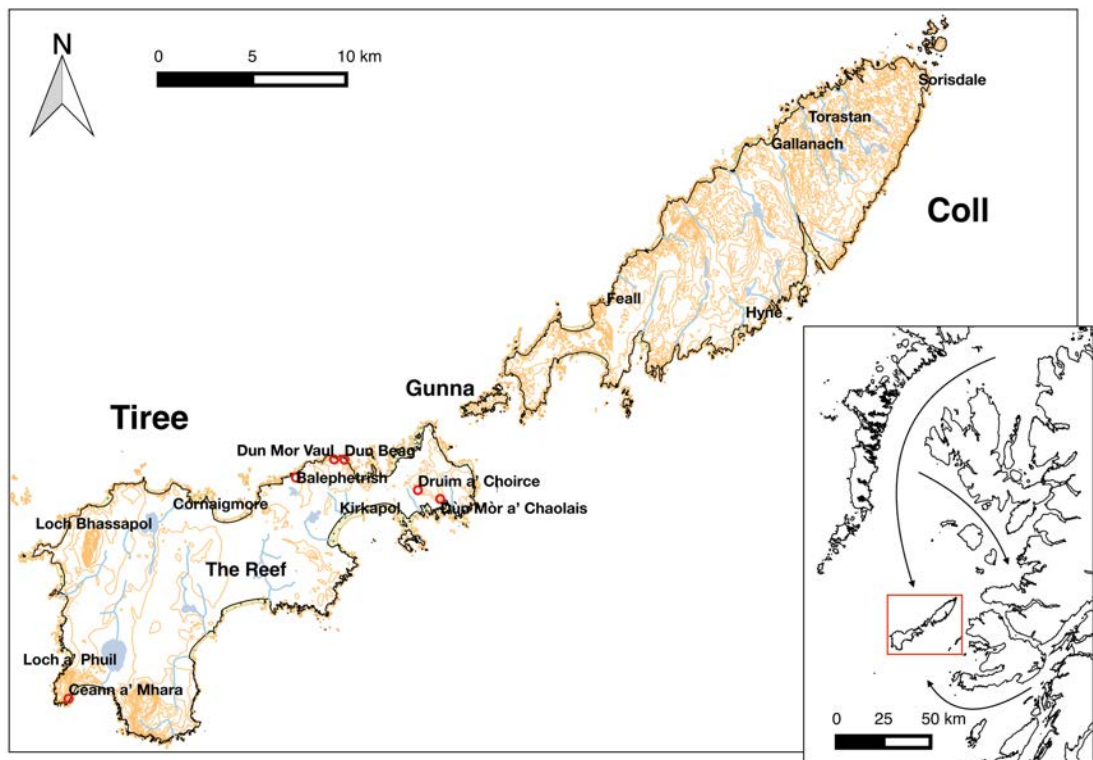
It wasn't an accident:  
the sea level rose  
little by little,  
hiding the Pict's rocks,  
rotting the Norse skiffs  
edging through the Gael's machair,  
blossom after blossom being submerged.

(‘Submerging’ — Macthòmais, R. [Thomson, D.] 2007: 59)

Each of the Hebridean islands, known to the Norse as the *Suðreyjar* (Southern Isles), present unique and intriguing contexts for the study of Scandinavian interaction and settlement during the Viking Age. Thus far, the Inner Hebrides have received a less rigorous assessment than the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland where historical and subsequently material evidence has proved abundant. More recent glimpses into the Viking Age archaeology of the Hebrides continue to underline the rich and complex character of impacts upon the local physical and cultural landscape. Nonetheless, with a conspicuous absence of documentary evidence, much interpretation elsewhere has depended on Norse linguistic traces extant in place-names. Advances in Norse archaeology in the Western Isles are similarly geographically skewed. Oram and Adderley (2010: 131) note the result as a “bizarre position of knowing more about the Norse in the Outer Isles than in any other part of the Hebrides”. Excavations at Cnip, Lewis and settlements at Bornais and Cille Pheadair, South Uist, have instigated long overdue insight into Scandinavian activity in the region, albeit in a somewhat rugged periphery (Welander *et al.* 1987; Sharples & Parker Pearson 1999). This constitutes an encouraging incentive to level the playing field in regards to investigating Norse influences across Scotland’s coastal zones.

The archaeological record for settled Norse populations in the Western Isles has long been “exiguous in the extreme” (Oram & Adderley 2010: 130). However, a paucity of focused archaeological excavation and historical sources can do little to dissuade the argument that the Western Isles held substantial significance to life in Viking Age Scotland and beyond. Any discussion of maritime communication and exchange must consider the primacy of the western sea-route. Parker-Pearson *et al.* (2004: 252) stress the importance of seafaring as providing access to both resources and a “highway” for

cultural contact and exchange. Particularly pertinent to the Western Isles locale, this mobility is evinced in ship-building finds from Cille Pheadair and more recently at Rubh' an Dùnain, Skye (Martin 2009). The success and status of Norse maritime traders and aristocrats is clearly demonstrated in several rich pagan boat burials dotted around the Inner Hebrides, including Colonsay, Islay and Ardnamurchan (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998; Harris *et al.* 2012). Furthermore, closely integrated links throughout these isles can be shown to have facilitated unique and fascinating material interactions, crucial to arguing the nature of contact with native populations. In stark contrast to the predominance of steatite vessels in the Northern Isles, a lasting Hebridean tradition of pottery is found to pervade in an innovative style, following the onset of the Viking Age from Lewis as far south as Tiree (Lane 1990; 2007). The increasing complexity with which interactions between natives and Norse are understood reiterates the position of the Western Isles at the forefront of many key issues in the Viking Age. Crawford (1987: 48) points to strong political, historical and cultural influences that would link Ireland, Norway and the subsequent settlers of Iceland within the arena of the Inner Hebridean seascape. It is therefore imperative that future research seeks out the archaeology underlying these relationships with renewed vigour.



**Figure 1:** Location map of the study area showing key sites and areas on Coll and Tiree. The two islands are shown in their close proximity to a southern Inner Hebridean zone, south of the Ardnamurchan peninsula, and the Small Isles. Maritime routes (arrowed) of Viking-Age migrants stress the distinction between this region and the Outer Hebrides. Author's own.

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Wider efforts to address this regional disparity can be guided by in-depth assessment as presented in this study. The islands of Coll and Tiree exhibit many of the issues concerning Norse archaeology in the Inner Hebrides, including unique limitations specific to their locale. Despite a strategic position along the western sea-route with a corresponding wealth of Norse-derived place-names and land divisions, archaeological recoveries from the Viking Age are next to none. A similar assessment can be made of the neighbouring Small Isles. While antiquarian reports of Norse artefacts are known, the objects and context are lost, with little modern excavation undertaken to clarify what remains. In this sense, these two islands precisely materialise the present state of the Norse archaeological record in the Inner Hebrides. Consolidation of the historical and onomastic sources in recent years has emphasised the 'high-profile' Coll and Tiree held during the Viking Age (Johnston 1991; Holliday 2014). This reiterates their value in the region and as a case-study that addresses the archaeological potential and approaches best suited to future research. This study will bring together findings thus far on Coll and Tiree, along with recent developments, under an archaeological perspective. The aim of such an approach is to identify the factors underlying a dearth of Norse finds, in contrast to toponyms and lasting administrative impacts on the landscape. Crucially, this questions whether a muted material record accurately reflects the extent of Norse migration or is resultant from the limitations of taphonomy and past research. Clarification on any bias in the archaeological record will serve future efforts into establishing a greater understanding of Norse activity in the Inner Hebrides. To this end, I aim to address three key research questions:

- (1) How might Norse presence be inferred given the strategic situation of Coll and Tiree in the seascape of the Western coast?
  - Past research will be gathered into a cohesive account demonstrating the islands' significance, as well as discussing the importance of the islands in relation to key themes of Viking Age maritime society and in the context of the Western Isles.
  
- (2) In what ways can this presence be manifest archaeologically?
  - Ongoing research into the archaeology of Norse interaction on the islands will be discussed in their Hebridean context. Various methods used will be evaluated, along with the extent and nature of the finds in comparison with assemblages across the Hebrides. Identifying the material expression of Scandinavian settlers is vital to understanding the variable impacts of Viking Age migration in the region.

- (3) What limitations exist to reconciling extensive place-name evidence with the archaeological record?
- Future research must be guided by determining the nature of Norse material traces on Coll and Tiree. An important discussion addressing the combined impacts of taphonomic preservation, past cultural interactions and modern academic approaches will elucidate the disparate relationship between documentary and material evidence.

Coll and Tiree present a rich opportunity to address critical shortcomings in the archaeology of Norse settlement in the Western Isles. The outcome of this assessment will offer some explanations for those shortcomings while underlining the potential for more informed interpretations through future enquiry.



## Context

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Lying c. 50km west of the Argyll mainland, Coll and Tiree comprise the outermost reach of the Inner Hebrides. Geologically, they bear a greater similarity to the Outer Hebrides with respect to a bedrock of Lewisian gneiss which forms three major island arcs, including Lewis and Barra, as well as Colonsay to Islay (Crawford 1978: 51). The weathering of this bedrock defines the local ecological setting, giving way to sand-blow and readily draining calcareous soils across a surreally flat landscape, punctuated only by a few small peaks (**Figure 2**). All land lies less than 141m above sea-level on Tiree and below 61m for the most of Coll. Elsewhere on Tiree, avoiding erosion and blow-outs, a fertile machair grassland takes hold. This flat, expansive plain lies in stark contrast to the Outer Hebrides, where exposed bedrock limits settlement to coastal machair strips bordering the rugged landscape. On Coll, the landscape is more varied in the dominance of heather and moorland on much of the southeastern half of the island, with undulating dunes occupying the machair that runs along the northwest coast.



**Figure 2:** Vista facing North across Loch a' Phuill, Tiree. The island's flat relief frequently allows views stretching from coast to coast, even at its broadest point.

Photo: Author's own

Relatively low annual rainfall (c. 1100mm), the highest sunlight hours in Britain (c. 1450hrs) and little temperature variation over the year account for the favourable climate this ecosystem enjoys (Bibby, Hudson & Henderson 1982: 14-15). While Coll exhibits similarly exposed bedrock away from the coasts and more acidic moorland on its eastern flank, the fertility of these islands forms a “heartland for west coast settlement at all periods” (Crawford & Switsur 1977: 126)(**Figure 3**). This favourability to agriculture is noted historically, particularly regarding the large machair Reef that stretches across the middle of Tiree, dividing the island in two. Martin Martin (1999 [1703]: 163) claims the Reef excelled “any parcel of land of its extent in the isles”, describing small tidal channels that frequently “overflow the whole”. The unique combination of sunlight, low relief and reduced soil acidity from shell sand grants abundant pasture to Coll and especially Tiree.



**Figure 3:** The more rugged heathland on Coll’s eastern flank is better suited to a pastoral economy, in contrast to the near-ubiquitous expanse of machairs on Tiree. Photo: Author’s own

As mentioned previously, these islands are also advantageously placed to be accessible to sea-traffic along the western coast (**Figure 1**). While Martin Martin (1999 [1703]: 163) notes a lack of convenient harbours for vessels of his time on the wind-blown shores of Tiree, this is challenged by Munro who points to “good haven for highland galleys” — shallow draught ships that could be drawn up onto the many sheltered beaches (Munro 1999[1549]: 318). Therefore, not only do Coll and Tiree offer rich and fertile land for settlement, but also present many inlets, bays and freshwater lakes for dragging boats ashore; characteristics certainly ideal during the Viking period. Strategic access by sea has been a feature of these islands over their long history of human occupation. Though scattered finds indicate occupation since the Mesolithic, Johnston (1995: 109) notes three later phases of settlement as immediately discernible. Firstly, Iron Age brochs and duns ring the islands and concentrate in the central, most fertile, portion of Coll with many in view of their neighbours (Beveridge 1903: 9). This level of defence hints at the value of the region in the past, continually reiterated in subsequent occupations. Administrative sources of the Irish Dalriadic kingdom show settlement continuing to thrive in the first millennium, followed by more detailed accounts tracing the growth of monastic communities in the area (Johnston 1995: 110). The remains of early Christian sites are found on Tiree at St Patrick’s Temple, Ceann a’ Mhara, in sculpture at Soroby and at the persisting ecclesiastical landscape of Kirkapol, centred on two chapels. These distinct land uses indicate a sustained succession of activity focused on the region and its routeways.

Access and communication also emphasise the context of Coll and Tiree in the western seascape from the ninth century. Crawford (1987: 11) states that the “geographical framework of Scandinavian

Scotland is maritime”. An outlook seaward arguably centres a way of life around islands such as Coll and Tiree — a life dominated by the sea and its means. Placing such islands in a wider context, maritime routes can be shown to facilitate contacts far and wide. In this sense the island chain of the Hebrides becomes a “stepping stone”, providing an ideal shipping route similar to the ‘North Way’ for which Norway is named (*ibid.* 1987: 19). Intriguingly, while this sea route may incorporate the Outer Hebrides in sailing west from Orkney, a much safer route would make use of the Great Glen to access the Inner Hebrides and North Channel through the heart of Scotland (*ibid.* 1987: 22)(**Figure 1**, inset). This voyage brings to mind Adomnán’s account of the *Life of St Columba*, which again highlights the ease of communication and travel through the Great Glen, while also providing some of the earliest mentions of Coll and Tiree, demonstrating the sphere of contacts in the Inner Hebrides (Sharpe 1995: 23). Tiree was home to several monastic communities linked directly to Iona since its foundation in c. 573AD (*ibid.* 1995: 21). Maritime contacts, from the nearby Columban monastery, stretching as far as Norway and south to Ireland would have profoundly impacted the two islands.

Upon the onset of the Viking Age, a monastic context notably placed Coll and Tiree in close proximity to the earliest Scandinavian contacts in the form of sporadic raids. These are recorded in *The Annals of Ulster*, however the local folklore on Tiree also tells of the ‘Battle of the Sheaves’ against Viking invaders. Subsequently, raids gave way to semi-permanent settlement upon over-wintering of Norse vessels in the many natural havens in the islands, accessible from a multitude of sheltered bays (Johnston 1995: 110). A local environment conducive to settlement would impact the history of Tiree and Coll from the ninth century until the Treaty of Perth, 1266AD, when they were relinquished by the Norwegian Crown.

## **Methodology**

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The fascinating and rich southern Hebridean context in which Coll and Tiree are situated demands focused insight into the potential for archaeology dating from the ninth to thirteenth centuries. The following audit utilises historical research, onomastic studies, landscape survey, aerial and laser imagery, stray finds recovery and material from excavation; though it has been noted that Coll and Tiree lack a dedicated excavation investigating the Norse period. This broad range of resources and approaches will provide ample data to inform such a strategy, when discussed in the context of the Western Isles and particularly the Inner Hebrides.

A key basis for this project from its outset lies in survey work undertaken by the author alongside the Association of Certificated Field Archaeologists (ACFA) and Northlight Heritage. The preliminary

survey, from April to May 2016, initiated efforts to explore the prehistoric and medieval archaeology of Tiree, to be supplemented for this project by additional trips to Coll by the author. Observations on the landscape and sites made in the field will inform the approach of this study, while also emphasising the importance of the island communities in supporting the pursuit of local heritage. Topographical survey will be strengthened by LiDAR data kindly provided by Scottish National Heritage.

Ultimately, upon reviewing the corpus of material available for archaeological prospection on Coll and Tiree, the limitations present in the study of this Inner Hebridean locale will be addressed to clarify the extent of Norse presence evident. The maritime milieu of the islands will be stressed in arguing for the nature of contacts and subsequent impacts on the landscape since the onset of the Viking Age.

## Regional Significance in the Viking Age — research to date

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This study aims to provide an archaeological enquiry into Norse settlement on Coll and Tiree, highlighting wider Scandinavian interactions in the southern Hebrides during the Viking Age. However, prior to assessing the archaeology recovered from the two islands in question, it is necessary to acknowledge previous research based upon onomastic and documentary sources. These studies set the premise for Norse settlement in the area and allude to the nature, extent and development of colonisation. Archaeological evidence from the surrounding isles and Outer Hebrides provide context and comparison for this case study, allowing further discussion into the significance of this region with regards to political, economic and communicative relations.

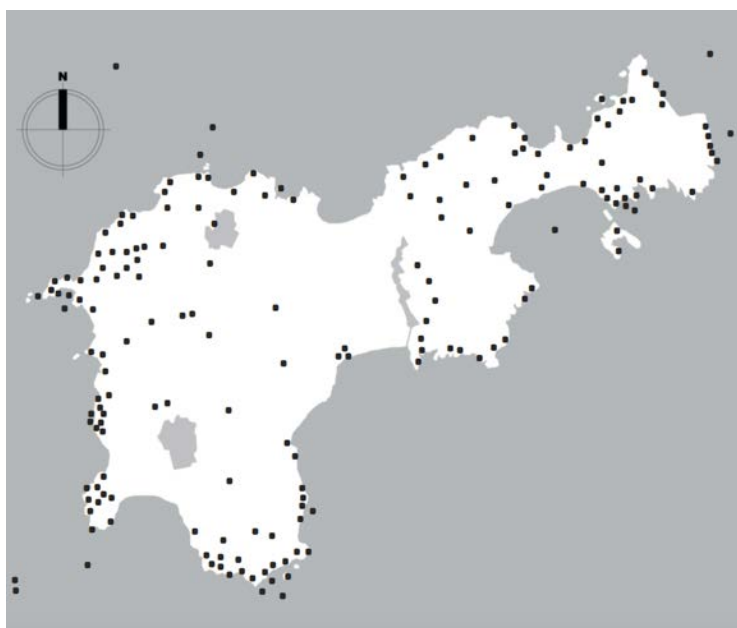
Place-name studies have taken precedence in many regions lacking archaeological evidence for Scandinavian settlement through excavation. The pervasive extent of Scandinavian influence on Scotland is largely evident in place-names that blanket the Northern Isles, northern and western mainland, and the Hebrides as far south as the Firth of Clyde (Nicolaisen 1969: 17). The use, distribution and subsequent survival of Norse elements, particularly in later Gaelic replacements in the Western Isles, are not only indicative of a “Norse colony” but also vital for signifying interactions with native Gaelic speakers (Kruse 2005: 158, 162). The pattern and extent of *fossilised* Norse elements in modern Gaelic toponyms — distinct from hybrids in that the Norse is uninfluenced by the Gaelic name — has led to perspectives regarding Scandinavian contacts in the southern Hebrides as “more complex” (Barrett 2008: 413; MacNiven 2013: 7). While the firm predominance of Gaelic place-names extant in the Inner Hebrides had previously been used to argue unsuccessful or minimal Scandinavian impacts during the Norse period, an appreciation of such palimpsest toponyms has challenged this view. Rather, Johnston (1995: 112) argues that since the majority of Gaelic place-names in Coll and Tiree likely stem from a post-Norse era, it is plausible that the landscape was once “described purely in Norse terms”.

The extent to which the Norse language may have come to dominate local speech is uncertain and likely varied according to socio-political relations across the Western Isles. MacNiven (2013: 5) observes an imbalance in the social status of the two languages, where the adoption of proportionally more Norse nouns into Gaelic may reflect the imperfect acquisition of Gaelic by native Norse speakers. In this sense, Norse incomers did not subvert the dominant language with regards to class, in contrast to interpretations concerning the Isle of Man (see Wilson 2008: 75; Megaw 1978: 288). Yet a conspicuous majority of Norse natural topographic names suggest a dominance in defining commonly used navigation markers (MacNiven 2013: 8). In examining the development of place-names specific to each

island context across the southern Hebrides, changing social relations come to account for the observed complexity of interactions, deconstructing a dichotomy regarding major/minor impacts across the Western Isles. Therefore, social complexity constitutes a vital consideration in the interpretation of onomastic sources within a comparative framework of landscape history and archaeological enquiry.

## **i. Place-names on Coll and Tiree – a summary**

Tiree and Coll have been subject to in-depth and compelling onomastic studies in recent years. Anne Johnston's 1991 PhD thesis laid out an interdisciplinary approach to determining Norse settlement developmental patterns on Coll and Tiree, as well as Mull and Lismore, based in place-name evidence while considering land quality and historical sources (Johnston 1991: 1). More recently, Holliday (2014) has reaffirmed Johnston's findings, again expressing the unique extent of Norse influence in place-names and land management on Tiree (**Figure 4**). The Norse component accounts for 50-60% of settlement names on Coll and Tiree, communicating a superficial quantitative extent in comparison to "30% for Islay, 15% for Mull and Lismore, 12% for Arran and less than 10% for Rhum, Eigg and Canna" (Johnston 1995: 111; Holliday 2014: 16). Further examination of the range and type of names, as



well as their distribution in relation to presumed earlier settlement patterns, allows a more detailed discussion of chronology and interaction with native groups.

**Figure 4:** Distribution of place-names with detectable Norse elements on Tiree. Within these, *habitative* place-names are distributed across the western half of Tiree, while being largely confined to the northern coast of Coll. (Holliday 2014: Fig. 4)

For instance, the use of topographical names for settlements referencing prominent natural features is regarded as indicating primary settlement sites, having served as navigational markers for exploration prior to colonisation (Johnston 1995: 116). In addition to landmarks described at Feall (ON *ffall*) 'hill', Hough (ON *baugr*) 'mound' and Cliad (ON *klettr*) 'rocks' on Coll, topographical elements commonly reference defensive features (*ibid.* 1995: 115). These defensive precursors to permanent settlement are



observed in the Northern Isles in the existence of headland dykes on Orkney, interpreted as a process of “ness-taking” (Crawford 1987: 46). A comparison between the location of these primary ‘foothold’ toponyms and pre-Norse settlements reveals approaches to indigenous contacts (**Figure 5**). The situation of forts and duns on areas favourable to agriculture, arguably providing refuge for nearby dwellings, is taken to reflect the foci of settlement preceding Norse colonisation (Holliday 2014: 12; Johnston 1995: 118). Negative correlation between Iron Age forts and Norse *habitative* place-names in Islay and Skye has been used to argue for segregated settlement upon the Norse colonisation, ‘infilling’ around indigenous areas (Nieke 1983: 313; Small 1976: 36). Johnston (1991: 311) warns against this interpretation, emphasising simplex topographical place-names as the most reliable indicators of primary settlement which positively correlate with Iron Age site regions. This suggests a scenario in which Norse incomers were quickly able to acquire prime sites and rename existing settlements, implying a “dispersal of the native population” to less favourable areas and/or the continued predominance of Norse naming practices (*ibid.* 1991: 317). The subsequent phasing of Norse settlement patterns can be elucidated through a more composite approach.



**Figure 5:** Traces of small, compartmented rectilinear structures lie in a field East of Dun Mor Vaul, Tìree, possibly pointing to medieval occupation close to Iron Age sites. Dun Beag lies in the background.

Photo: Author's own

Though topographical settlement names are commonly taken as constituting a primary phase of occupation, the use of natural features in naming can take place at any time, presenting issues in relative dating. As such, the case for a primary settlement phase on Coll and Tìree is reinforced through measures of land quality as shown in fiscal evaluations and land rentals of the Scottish period. The use of fiscal analysis for inferring settlement chronology has previously been established in Norway (see

Sandnes 1973). In this respect, it is assumed that “a settlement with a high valuation is likely to predate a settlement, in the nearby vicinity, with a lower valuation” (Johnston 1995: 114). Identification of 16 primary ‘ounceland’ units on Tiree and 10 on Coll using these criteria, largely corresponding to inherent divisions in the landscape, reiterates the overall proportion of Norse settlement names, with over half being Norse-derived (**Figure 6**).

Furthermore, fiscal analysis has also pinpointed peripheral expansion of secondary settlements, as well as those no longer extant due to sandblow such as Bhassapoll (ON *vatns bólstaðr*) ‘fresh water farm’, retained as a landscape name on Tiree (Johnston 1995: 113). The relationship demonstrated in these secondary sub-divisions and the retention of Norse elements in modern township names clearly stress the role of Norse colonists in swiftly imposing a lasting administrative system of land division on the islands (Holliday 2014: 48). This is additionally highlighted by the sheer value expressed in evaluations of land units. Turnbull’s 1768-9 extensive survey of Tiree in particular records the division of



**Figure 6:** Primary settlement units and ounceland divisions on Coll and Tiree (Johnson 1995: Fig. 22 & 24).



ouncelands, merklands and maillands, with the latter unit being unique to the island as a measure of value (Johnston 1991: 254). Likely imposed on the islands from the ninth century, given a correlation with primary place-names, the ounceland (worth an ounce of silver) demonstrates the richness of the landscape on Coll and Tiree as well as the longevity of Norse control over land division.

## **ii. The political sphere of the Inner Hebrides**

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The prominence of Tiree and Coll in the surrounding region can therefore be assessed, not only with regards to geography and economic means, but also in resultant socio-political importance. Mention of place-names and associated individuals in historical documents presents a final source to be consulted in a composite onomastic study of the islands. This draws attention to events throughout the Hebrides in general, in addition to specific mentions of the islands, settlements or residents by name. As mentioned previously, the *Life of Columba* names Tiree and Coll as the site of a monastic tradition linked to Iona from the sixth century, pointing to a later target for overseas raids. *The Annals of Ulster* are commonly cited in dating such Viking raids that saw the Hebrides and Ireland “plundered by the heathen” in 798AD (*The Annals of Ulster* 1983: 253). Accounts of violent encounters are supported by two folktales on Tiree, still locally well-known today, describing the routing of Norse invaders by the natives in the ‘Battle of the Sheaves’ (Holliday 2014: 40). The second of these tales, in which a boy defeats a Viking chief demanding tax, also hints at more permanent Norse presence and overlordship that traces the development of Scandinavian interaction.

Saga references reflect this phase of Norse colonisation, developing from sporadic raids to habitation during winter in “the islands beyond the sea” (*Heimskringla* 1964: 77). Yet Coll and Tiree also feature specifically in the later context of a Norse colony. *Njal’s Saga* (2001: 152-3) refers to Earl Gilli from Coll, an eleventh-century Norse chief in the Hebrides, although the accuracy and reliability of this saga is uncertain. Nonetheless, Earl Gilli’s prestige and strong links to the Orkney earldom communicate a significant sphere of influence for the Inner Hebrides remembered in local folk tradition. The presence of an aristocratic Norse chief is found for Tiree in *Orkneyinga Saga*, naming Holdbodi as a “great chieftain” of the twelfth century, thought to have resided at the lost settlement of Bee (ON *bu*) ‘farmstead’ (*Orkneyinga Saga* 1981: 264). The use of a ‘*bu*’ iteration is consistent with high-status estates in Orkney (Marwick 1952: 249). These political figures reiterate the maritime context of their estate, holding ties to the Northern Isles, Ireland and Man. The appearance of Coll and Tiree in the sagas is significant in illustrating the importance of these islands politically, corroborating the place-name evidence in spite of a dearth of archaeological sites.

In light of the extensive onomastic research that has presented the strongest case to date on Norse presence on Tiree and Coll, an archaeological approach is much overdue. Johnston (1991: 320) explicitly calls for future research to “concentrate on the archaeological aspects of Norse settlement”, particularly on Tiree due to a simultaneous richness and fragility of the wind-blown landscape. Yet the relationship between place-name evidence and archaeological recovery must be explored. How applicable have place-name studies been to the identification of settlements in the field? Leslie and Elizabeth Alcock conducted a series of case-study investigations in an attempt to test this hypothesis that so-called Scandinavian place-names can be used to locate the physical remains of settlement (Alcock & Alcock 1980). Their efforts at the site of Burg (ON *borg*) ‘fort’, Mull and the primary ‘ounceland’ township of Kirkapol (ON *kirkjubólstaðr*) ‘church farm’, on Tiree, emphasise the difficulties in readily identifying Norse dwellings. It is noted that a degree of uncertainty remains in assuming Norse elements apparent in sixteenth-century names are indeed as they appear (*ibid.* 1980: 64). Traditions over the course of centuries are also liable to change and names can be transferred. Complex layering of settlement phases, exacerbated by erosion and sand-blow, substantially dulls the keenness of survey on the ground (*ibid.* 1980: 68).

The use of map survey and field-walking highlights crucial limitations to the location of settlement sites within a landscape occupied continually in the past, to be discussed in later sections. As for the authenticity of place-name data, the importance of an interdisciplinary approach is vital in pinpointing the most viable areas for field study. Coll and Tiree provide input in an abundance of toponyms for such an approach.

### **iii. Norse archaeology in the Western Isles**

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In placing the historical and onomastic evidence presented above in context, it is important to address the advances in archaeological evidence throughout the surrounding isles. While it has been noted that the Western Isles have received less attention, with regards to Norse material, than the Northern Isles or Irish Sea region, several discoveries and excavations provide a sense of Norse activity and its character in the Hebrides. Three case studies detailing developments in recent decades will serve to illustrate the range of archaeological insight gained for this region.

#### **Swordle Bay Burial, Ardnamurchan**

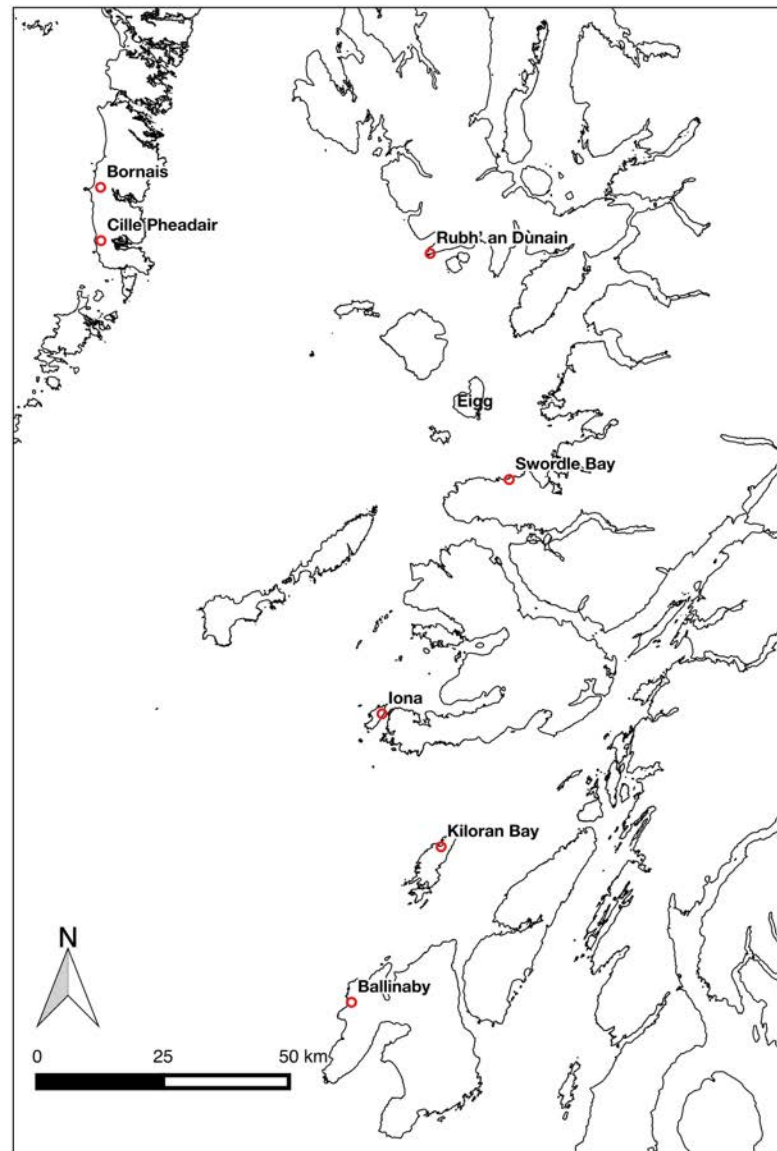
The excavation of a natural shingle mound on the northern coast of the Ardnamurchan peninsula has revealed the most recent of Viking boat burials found in Scotland, as well as the first on the UK mainland

(Harris *et al.* forthcoming)(Figure). This high status pagan burial tradition, with overt parallels in Scandinavia, is observed in several instances around the Scottish Isles, incorporating vessels 5 to 12 metres in length (Müller-Wille 2007: 287-90). Intriguingly while the 7-metre boat burial at Scar, Orkney is perhaps the most well-known and documented find, it is the Inner Hebridean island of Colonsay that holds the “most important” pagan Norse burial at Kiloran Bay, dated to the mid-ninth century (Anderson 1907: 447; Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 90). Crucially, both the Ardnamurchan and Kiloran Bay burials convey a strong aristocratic tradition of funerary practice that cites the defining characteristics of Norse life and identity in the Western Isles. At c. 5.1m, the early tenth-century Ardnamurchan vessel is half the size of that speculated at Kiloran Bay, yet the richness of grave goods found placed around and on the body communicates the status of the individual interred (Harris *et al.* forthcoming: 1). Isotopic analyses of the teeth which solely remain suggest an origin from Scandinavia, Ireland or eastern Scotland, clarified by the overall grave setting and the inclusion of a sword of Scandinavian-type, decorated with silver and copper wire (*ibid.* forthcoming: 3). Yet the placement of a whetstone, striking flints and sickle centrally on the body has parallels at Cnip, Lewis, while links southward are demonstrated through an Irish copper-alloy ringed pin with 3 bosses (Welander *et al.* 1987: 151; Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 98). The individual burial and material associations bear significant resemblance to the connections inferred from Kiloran Bay.

Not only do these burials show a range of provenance for grave goods, but directly reference the maritime surroundings through which such links were established. The accessibility and visibility of burials at Swordle and Kiloran Bay, at natural sites ideal for beaching shallow craft, arguably provide the “prime location for a chieftain’s burial” (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 122). The addition of balanced scales at Kiloran Bay and a ‘repair kit’ of boat rivets at Ardnamurchan, c. 30 km from Coll, communicate the inherent importance of mobility and contacts throughout this maritime zone, hinting at trade or conflict (Anderson 1907: 444; Harris *et al.* forthcoming: 4). Most importantly, the performative act of funerary rites in establishing local identities is evident in the theatre constituted by these burial settings. The sword and spear found at Swordle Bay were both broken and placed at differing stages in the construction of the grave’s stone covering (Harris *et al.* forthcoming: 2). A horse complete with riding gear, included in the Kiloran Bay burial, emphasises extraordinary investment in the funerary act, particularly if the horse was sacrificed as part of the proceedings (Anderson 1907: 445). Thus, the Inner Hebrides are not without conspicuous displays of Norse aristocratic influence, consumption and identity deeply embedded in the local seascape. Additional convincing comparison of rich Scandinavian diasporic assemblages and display can be found throughout the Isles, including at Ballinaby, Islay and through the Northern Channel at Balladoole, Isle of Man (Anderson 1880; Müller-Wille 2007: 292). These

high-status burials, while not representative of a wider settled population, nonetheless establish the Western Isles at the heart of vast communicative routes North and South from early in the Viking Age.

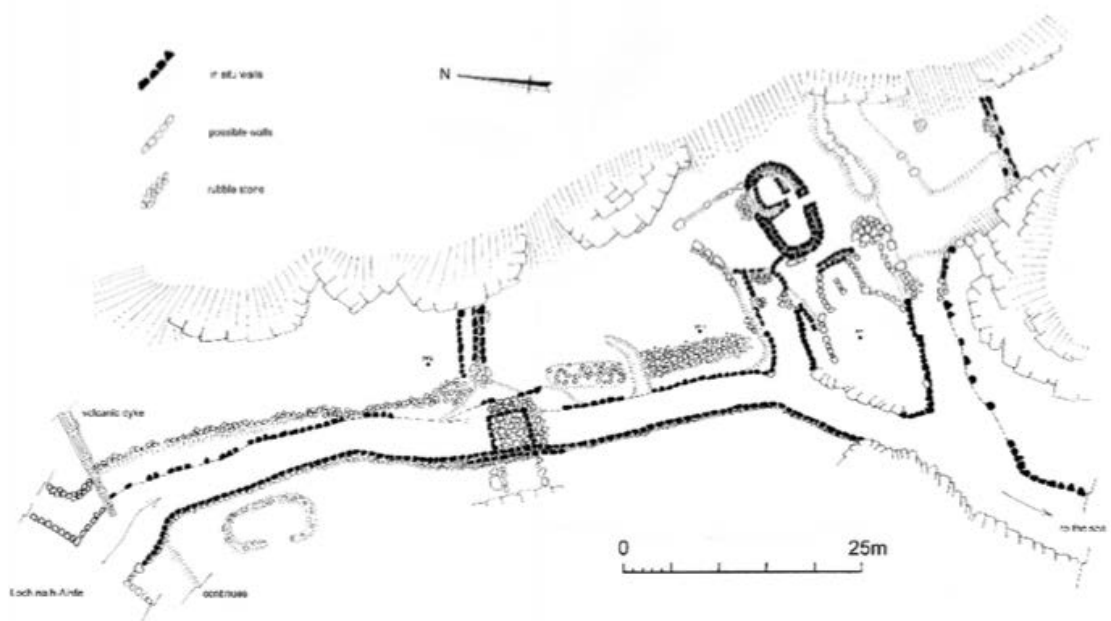
**Figure 7:** Map showing the location of key sites discussed in the text. Coll and Tiree are situated in the heart of the Hebridean seascape, clearly demonstrating the range of activity and contacts North and South. Author's own. Source: [gadm.org](http://gadm.org)



### **Rubh' an Dùnain, Skye**

The maritime lifestyle expressed in burial evidence is found to pervade the material record in distinct contexts throughout the Viking Age. Continued maritime activity is evinced at focal points such as the recently surveyed canal at Rubh' an Dùnain, southwest Skye (Martin 2009: 1). Non-intrusive fieldwork has drawn attention to a watercourse running from the shallow Loch na h-Àirde that has undergone substantial modification over time, including control of tidal flow with a dam, the opening of two small nausts (boathouses) and the construction of a small stone quay along the loch shore (*ibid.* 2009: 13, 16) (**Figure 8**). The long-developed use of this site is demonstrated in dating from the nearby Iron Age dun, to post-medieval structures associated with the canal.

While later use may have centred on utilising the watercourse for a mill, the medieval period would have seen substantial activity in exploiting the area as a shelter for vessels — maintaining a somewhat constant water level would have allowed over-wintering and repair rather than mooring of boats, within easy access of the sea (Martin 2009: 15). Boat timbers discovered in the loch have been dated to c. 1100AD and indicate a construction and size similar to the 6.1m faering found with the tenth-century Gokstad ship burial (*ibid.* 2009: 2). When taken in context with the canal and its features, this find is unparalleled in Scotland; although similar clinker-vessel boat stems have been found on nearby Eigg (**Figure 8**), ship-building evidence remains on a more overt scale for Dublin to the south (Christensen 1984: 87-88). Though undoubtedly modified throughout its use into the Middle Ages, the early appearance of the nausts emphasises the importance of maritime activity at this site from as early as the Iron Age and strengthens the case for intensive use during the Viking Age (Martin 2009: 15). Particularly in the context of beaching sites, sheltered lochs and boat repair in the surrounding isles, these finds provide invaluable windows into the nodal sites of activity in the Inner Hebrides.



**Figure 8:** The canal features at Rubh' an Dùnain (Martin Wildgoose, Martin 2009: Fig. 8) and, right; the preserved boat stem recovered from Eigg, c. 30km SSE. Copyright: National Museums Scotland



## **Bornais & Cille Pheadair, South Uist**

An imbalance in the archaeological investigation of Norse settlement is evident across the Scottish Isles. The Northern Isles and Caithness have been subject to substantial discovery and important research from the first half of the twentieth century, at sites including Jarlshof, Shetland; Birsay, Orkney and Freswick Links, Caithness; which have prompted later excavations and continued study (Curle 1939; Hamilton 1956; Hunter 1986; Batey 1987). Concurrently, valuable data from the excavation of the Udal, North Uist remains largely unpublished; though interim reports provided a first glimpse at the sequence of Norse settlement in this region (Crawford 1986). Importantly this imbalance is observed in multiple periods and therefore likely reflects an uneven practice of archaeology in Scotland rather than any relative insignificance of the Western Isles in the context of the Norse in the North Atlantic (Sharples & Parker Pearson 1999: 43). To demonstrate this fact, excavations on the island of South Uist have proven to reveal one of the most densely settled areas in Scandinavian Scotland (Parker Pearson 2012: 28). Given the close parallels with regards to landscape, geology and preceding settlement patterns, the sequences found at Bornais and Cille Pheadair provide well-published comparative material for Norse archaeology on Coll and Tiree.

Located on a strip of machair that stretches north-south along the western coast of South Uist, both Bornais and Cille Pheadair were identified as Norse settlements following survey of the distinctive mounds formed by sediment deposition from both archaeological debris and sand-blow. The subsequent excavation reports thus provide a clear account of the ease of identification, as well as discussing their landscape setting in relation to the both the machair and preceding Iron Age settlement (Sharples & Parker Pearson 1999: 43-47). Furthermore, comparison between these two sites considers differing sequences of development in construction and occupation, while reiterating the trend of minor locational shifts that can be argued for the surrounding region (*ibid.* 1999: 50).

However, it is the recognition of a regionally distinctive Norse pottery tradition that has truly “transformed” interpretations and research of the Western Isles (*ibid.* 1999: 43; Lane 1990). This unique innovation, with no comparison in the Northern Isles, sufficiently communicates the complex and novel interactions sparked by the Norse colonisation of the Hebrides and reinforces the distinct links along the western coast. The settlements at Bornais and Cille Pheadair will be discussed in further detail with regard to the comparative potential found on Coll and Tiree below.

## The Archaeology of Norse Settlement on Coll and Tiree

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An inventory of archaeological material pertinent to Norse settlement on Tiree and Coll can now be discussed with reference to the contextual sources addressed in the preceding pages. These finds vary in provenance and kind, with many notable instances remaining dependent on antiquarian records in absence of the finds themselves. Consequentially, this diversity in material is collated and clarified by recent survey work this season, which will not only present a general overview of the compelling case for Norse colonisation on the islands, but also highlight key sites and finds that particularly merit future consideration and enquiry.

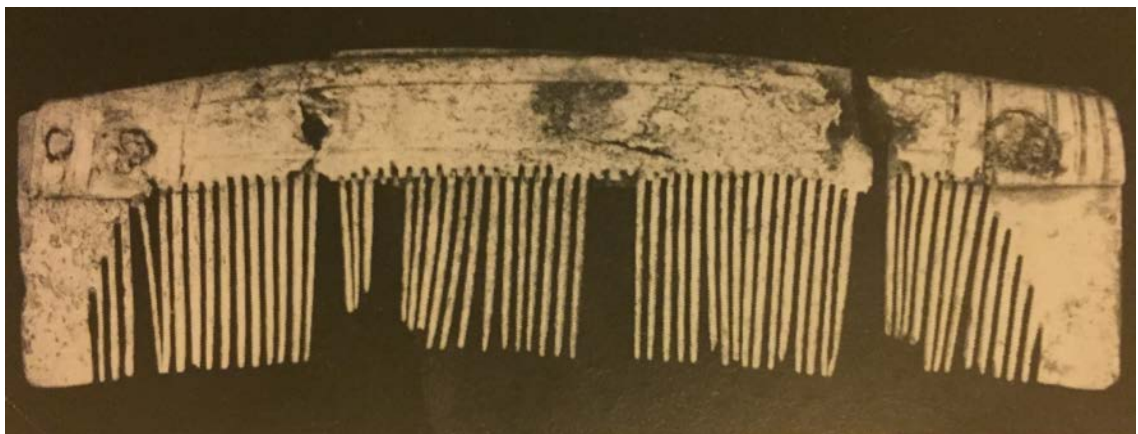
Early records of Norse archaeological finds on the islands can be found in the *Statistical Accounts of Scotland* which, within a range of descriptions and assessments, include comments on antiquities often recovered inadvertently by local tenants. One intriguing account notes the discovery of “human skeletons, and nigh them the skeletons of horses, . . . completely armed according to the times” in a stack-yard at Cornaigbeg, Tiree (*Statistical Account of Scotland*, x 1794: 402). These remains, which included those of an infant in another’s arms, were accompanied with “two-handed swords” with silver-work decoration, shields, helmets and a brass spear (*ibid.* 1794: 402). Despite the fact that these artefacts are now lost, this description is sufficiently detailed to argue the presence of a Norse burial ground in the area, given the distinctive funerary customs conveyed. A similar discovery made on Tiree saw a pair of oval brooches and a bronze pin recovered from a grave, of which no further details are known; one of the brooches was likely exhibited to the Society of Antiquaries on 15th March 1847 by Sir John Graham Dalzell, while the other brooch and pin have been held by the National Museum since 1872 (Anderson 1874: 554-5; *Argyll: An Inventory of the Monuments*, III 1980: 119)(**Figure 9**).



**Figure 9:** Oval brooch (12cm) (one of two) and pin (17cm) from a Viking burial in Tiree, presented to the National Museum. (*Argyll: An Inventory of the Monuments*, III 1980: Pl. 3 D,E,F)

Together these antiquarian records constitute the limited yet significant evidence for Norse burial on Tiree, establishing the material affirmation of presence implied from other sources. In addition to the occasional unearthing of skeletal remains, antiquarian sources also note the accidental discovery of silver hoards on Tiree. One mixed hoard pertaining to the Viking Age is dated to c. 907AD, consisting of a “substantial, although uncertain, number of Anglo-Saxon coins, . . . c. 250–500 in number” along with a 5 cm nicked silver ingot, discovered in 1780 (Graham-Campbell 2011: 255). Found near the broch at Dùn Mór a’ Chaolais, which commands a clear view over the north-east end of Tiree, this hoard confirms another facet of Norse archaeological traces that hint at prolonged occupation from the ninth and tenth centuries.

Finds of Norse-period character and date can also be recovered in the course of survey and excavation on the various Iron Age duns and brochs that dot the islands. The more recent and better-conserved material comes from the excavation of Dun Mor Vul, Tiree by Dr Ewan MacKie, who found a repaired composite antler comb under the rubble of a collapsed lintel (MacKie 1974: 90). The tripartite comb is similar to examples from Jarlshof, Shetland and dates to the eighth-ninth century (**Figure 10**). Whether deposited at this time or in use into the Late Norse period, the additional finds of iron-stained flints, a whetstone and small bronze hemispheres group the comb in a Norse assemblage comparable to occupation horizons of Iron Age sites in the Northern Isles, such as Old Scatness (Batey 2002: 185, 190). In addition, a disarticulated burial in the central court of the broch has been dated to the ninth century, argued as a Norse reburial attributable to the same context of re-occupation as the comb and showing signs of a violent death in a clean-cut cranium fragment (*ibid.* 1974: 91, 214). Viking Age re-use of the Iron Age structures has previously been supported in surviving place-names, particularly due to their location on defensive viewpoints such as Dun Ibrig, Tiree (ON *iðri, bryggja*; uncertain) ‘inner landing place’ (Beveridge 1903: 112; Holliday 2014: 99). Erskine Beveridge (1903: 16) comments on the Norse



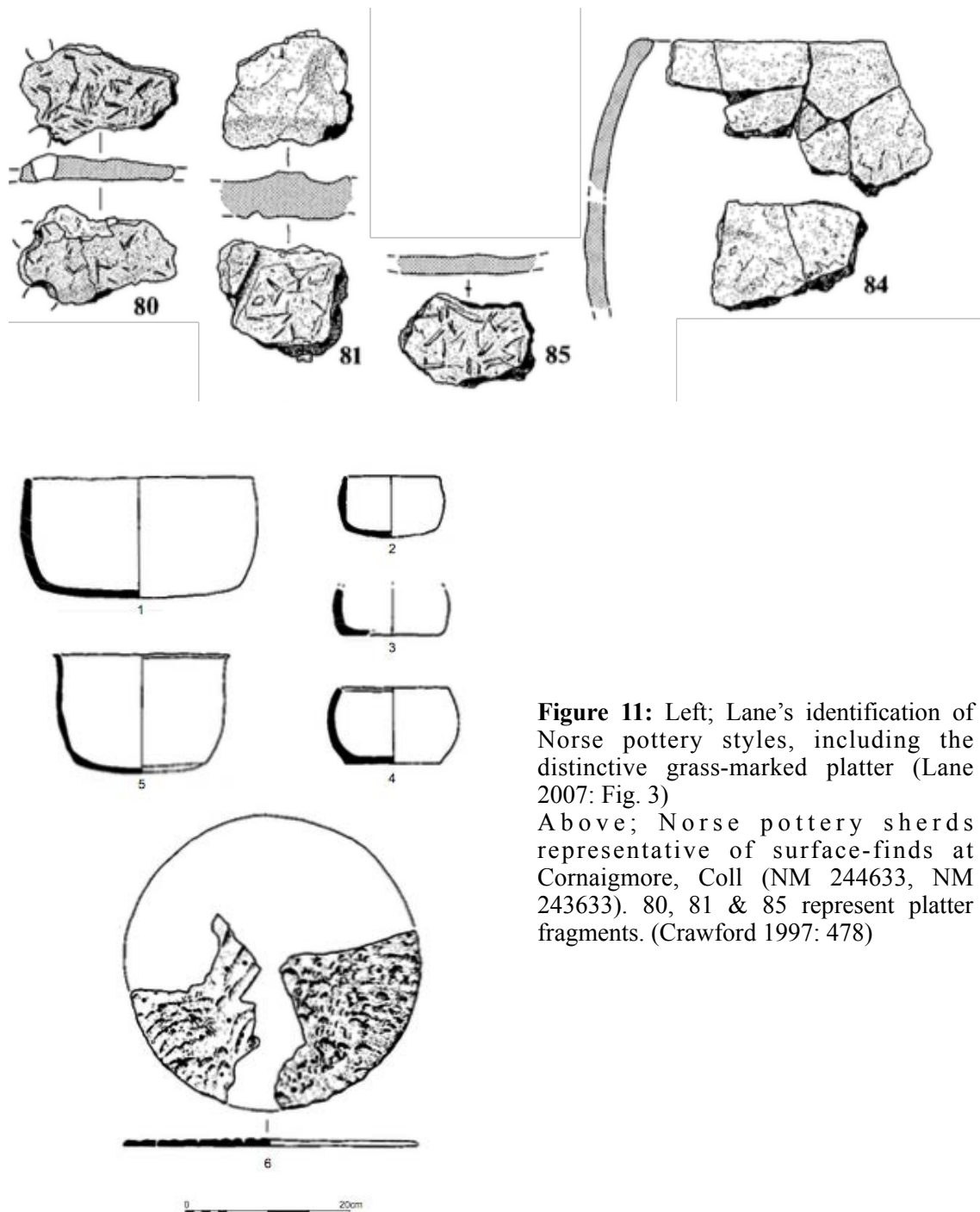
**Figure 10:** Antler comb recovered from Dun Mor Vul (MacKie 1974). It has undergone repair at least once and remains one of the few distinct Norse artefacts from Tiree and Coll.



occupation close to and within broch sites, also noting finds of corroded iron rivets “of the Viking type” at Bousd (ON *bolstaðir*) ‘farm’ on Coll. This material relationship has notable implications for understanding the process of Norse colonisation with regard to preceding settlement, as well as demonstrating the nature of settlement archaeology in the area impacted by the continued re-occupation of sites.

Finally, one of the most critical assemblages surfacing in stray finds from Coll and Tiree points to important wider sequences and relations in the Hebrides as a whole. Following early analysis of ceramic sequences at the Udal, North Uist, Lane (1990) demonstrated the introduction of a Viking-Age pottery tradition superseding a pre-Viking ‘Plain Style’. Low-fired “bucket and shouldered jar forms” with long flaring rims were replaced with distinctive sagging and flat-based open bowls and cups, as well as unique flat discs or ‘platters’, coinciding with the early Viking context attributed to rectilinear architecture on the site (Lane 2010: 205-9)(**Figure 11**). Comparison with other site assemblages has now identified some 50 sites in a Hebridean tradition of Viking/Late Norse pottery stretching from the north of Lewis to Tiree and Coll in the south, demanding a fascinating debate on the processes and interactions that facilitated the development of this innovative technological shift (*ibid.* 2010: 212). Inherent in this observation is the vital implication that Norse settlement in the Hebrides was of a truly distinct character in comparison to that of the Northern Isles or elsewhere, which show no obvious parallels to Viking-Age Hebridean pottery usage. Though ceramics do appear in Late Norse assemblages in the Northern Isles, grass-tempering decisively distinguishes this usage from the diagnostic grass-marked bases of Hebridean Norse ‘platter-ware’ (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 223-5). Viking-Age pottery sherds have been recovered as surface finds at Cornaigmore, Gallanach, Feall and Torastan on Coll with consequently little contextual data (Lane & Cowie 1997: 499). On Tiree, the diagnostic instance of ‘platter-ware’ is identified in tenth- to fourteenth-century sherds from ‘Cornaig’, likely the dunes west of Cornaigmore (Lane *pers. comm.*). In better determining the dating of the Western Isles sequence, it will be possible to understand the influences and contacts contributing to Norse domestic life in the region.

While the scarcity of published early Viking sites in the Hebrides hinders conclusive dating of respective pottery traditions, it has been argued that the preceding Plain Style represents a continuation of the Iron Age sequence (Lane 2010: 213). Subsequently, excavations at Cille Pheadair and Bornais, South Uist, have provided a “fine-grained stratigraphic phasing” in Norse pottery that shows platter-ware comprising just 5% of the assemblage by c. 1050AD, rising to 46% by c. 1300AD with continued use thereafter (Parker Pearson 2012: 407). The key points to highlight from these sites stress the introduction of an innovative pottery style, associated with a Scandinavian character yet lasting and developing into the medieval period as late as 1400AD. Additionally, while this new ceramic tradition



**Figure 11:** Left; Lane's identification of Norse pottery styles, including the distinctive grass-marked platter (Lane 2007: Fig. 3)

Above; Norse pottery sherds representative of surface-finds at Cornaigmore, Coll (NM 244633, NM 243633). 80, 81 & 85 represent platter fragments. (Crawford 1997: 478)

comes to replace the earlier Plain Style assemblage, a terminal date for Plain Style is uncertain and the earliest Viking context at the Udal is dominated by this preceding ceramic type (Lane 2010: 208). Therefore while Norse platter-ware may be used to debate the adoption of new technologies and cooking behaviours, latent finds of Plain Style along with continued occupation close to Late Iron Age settlements must be acknowledged in understanding the development of Viking-Age pottery styles. Parker Pearson (2012: 418) emphasises the swing in long-distance trade goods reaching the Hebrides from Norway by way of Shetland, to goods coming from the south — from England and particularly Ireland. The Hebridean pottery sequence invigorates this discussion in considering the varying influences displayed in platter-ware use. The distinctive flat platters could arguably be a later

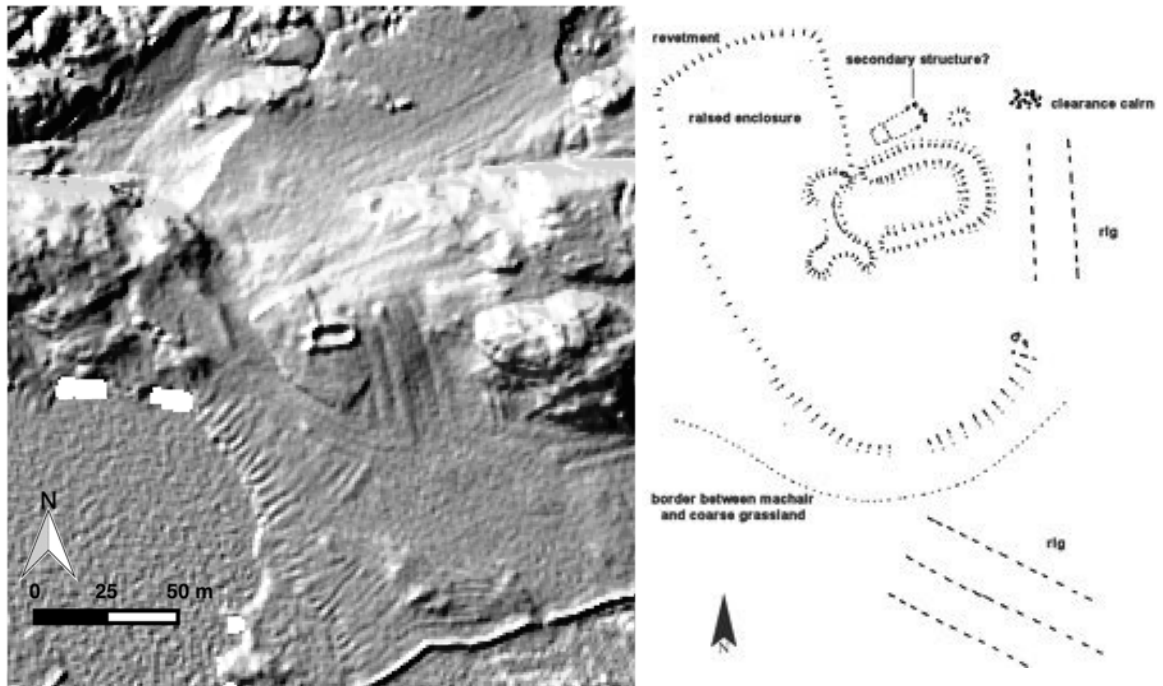
skeuomorph of steatite discs developed in the Northern Isles and Norway; indeed some early Viking-Age contexts may include pre-platter use prior to the appearance of steatite forms in their respective regions (Lane 2010: 211). Flat-based cup and open bowl forms could similarly imitate Norse wood or stone vessels, yet significant parallels in Souterrain Ware point to links with northern Ireland, concentrated in Co. Antrim and dating from the eighth century (*ibid.* 2007: 15). This reiterates the range of potential contacts to consider in the debate on the interactions that came to define Norse settlement in the southern Hebrides and surrounding region. Tiree and Coll are thus placed as the southernmost instance of a distinctive region of Norse socio-economic and technological influence, with a corresponding array of superficial finds, prior to dedicated excavation of likely settlement sites as established in the Outer Hebrides.

## **i. Landscape and Settlement Survey**

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From April to May 2016, a survey was conducted on Tiree by the Association of Certificated Field Archaeologists and Northlight Heritage to record settlement sites on the island. The aim was to discern the distribution of sites at different periods and the history of settlement in the landscape. For the purposes of this paper, the author also independently conducted a further survey on Tiree and Coll in August with the express aim of reviewing areas for potential Norse settlement and making key observations on the landscape as a context for Norse colonisation. The combined methods of these landscape surveys included aerial imaging, historical and onomastic reference and a LiDAR-derived digital elevation model (DEM) to assist the observation and recording of features on the ground. The notable sites and considerations discussed below comprise the findings most pertinent to the Norse period and future strategies for Viking archaeology in the region.

Particularly due to the flat topography of Tiree, satellite imagery and DEMs are immediately helpful in identifying even low-lying structural remains on the ground surface. Though LiDAR data is thus far only available for Tiree and the southern extremity of Coll; and at a slightly lower resolution than is ideal, these aerial methods of survey were effective in highlighting building plans still visible from above. One such example is found near Balephetrish, Tiree. The imagery showed the clear outline of a rectilinear structure with opposing doorways in the long sides, set upon a wider cultivation platform with rig-and-furrow, an ancillary structure and a seemingly structured entrance way (**Figure 12**). Locating this site on the ground was therefore made easy and it was quickly possible to observe and record the key features observed from above.



**Figure 12:** Longhouse structure at Balephetrish as visible on a LiDAR-derived terrain model and as drawn on the ground. Note the definition of the enclosure and rig cultivation.

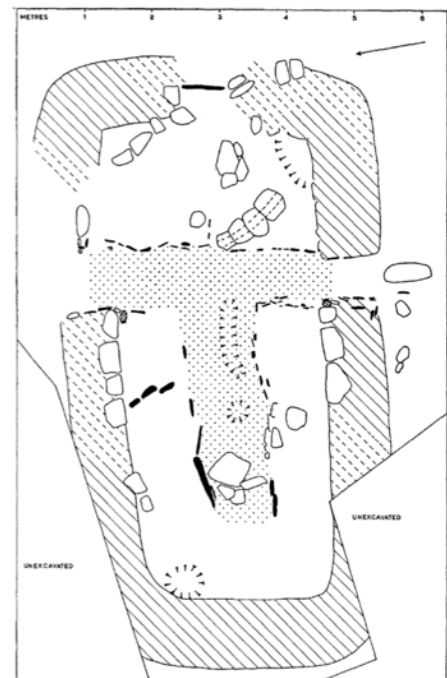
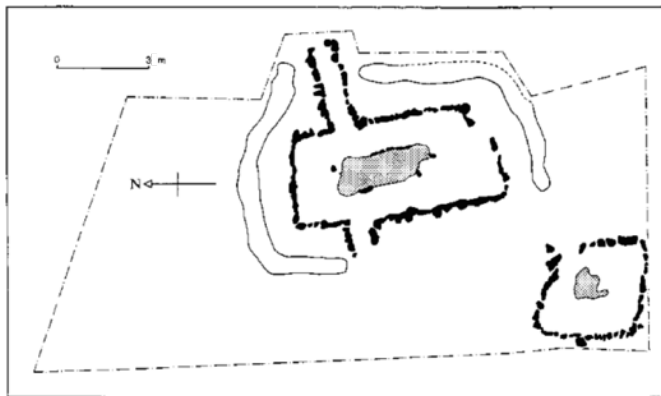
Sketch: Wendy Raine, ACFA 2016

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The building measures 13m by 5m with rounded corners, giving a ‘playing card’ form and is sunken into the surrounding platform with turf walls constructed on a stone boulder setting (**Figure 12**). The platform enclosure is revetted by field boulders on a straight northwest edge that forms a corner to run up to the northern entranceway of the house. The site is not shown on Turnbull’s 18th-century map, yet dating the occupation of the building is uncertain. Several characteristics are reminiscent of Norse rectilinear houses, particularly at Cronk ny Merriu and Doarlish Cashen, Isle of Man, as well as Cille Pheadair, S. Uist (Gelling 1970: 81; Sharples & Parker Pearson 1999: 53)(**Figure 13**).

The Manx examples exhibit the diagnostic rounded corners and opposing entrances, yet also highlight some inconsistencies; namely the unusually thick walls of the Balephetrish structure. At over 2 metres in width, the walls more closely match later medieval structures observed locally on Tiree and Coll, culminating in the later blackhouse tradition. The building is also larger than other Norse examples, although it is noted that Cronk ny Merriu is confined by the promontory on which it is built. As such, Balephetrish may indicate a later date of occupation, or a local adaptation to conditions in the machair landscape — an important consideration when assessing the character of Viking-Age and medieval farmsteads on the islands.

Use of onomastic sources also aided in the survey of medieval buildings at Ceann a' Mhara (ON generic *varðri*) 'beacon' (Holliday 2014: 73). This headland holds a strategic viewshed over the southwest coast of Tiree and Balephuill Bay, also allowing views inland to Loch a' Phuill (**Figure 15**). The identification of one structure atop the headland close to the coast also showed similarities to Manx Norse sites, including closer proportions yet only one entrance (**Figure 14**). However, a later medieval date for these apparent shieling sites must be considered, with additional structures in the area indicating recurring later use, potentially rebuilding on earlier structures. This pattern of phasing is observed at many sites on Tiree and Coll and is arguably a major factor in the uncertain survival of Norse structures on the surface. The complex at Druim a' Choirce, Tiree, incorporates many earlier folds and building plans into plot boundaries and later walls demonstrating the continued use of sites over the island's history (**Figure 20**).



**Figure 13:** Structural comparison using examples from Cille Pheadair (above) and Doarlish Cashen (right) (Sharples & Parker Pearson 1999: Fig. 6; Gelling 1970: Fig. 30).

These demonstrate the distinctiveness of the longhouse style, while cautioning against oversimplifications regarding the variable forms this might take in differing contexts. Access analysis would aid a more in-depth study in distinguishing these contexts of social structure and use.

**Figure 14:** Single-celled 5x3 metre rectilinear structure at Ceann a' Mhara. The single entrance to the southwest is visible on the bottom-left of the image. Photo: Author's own





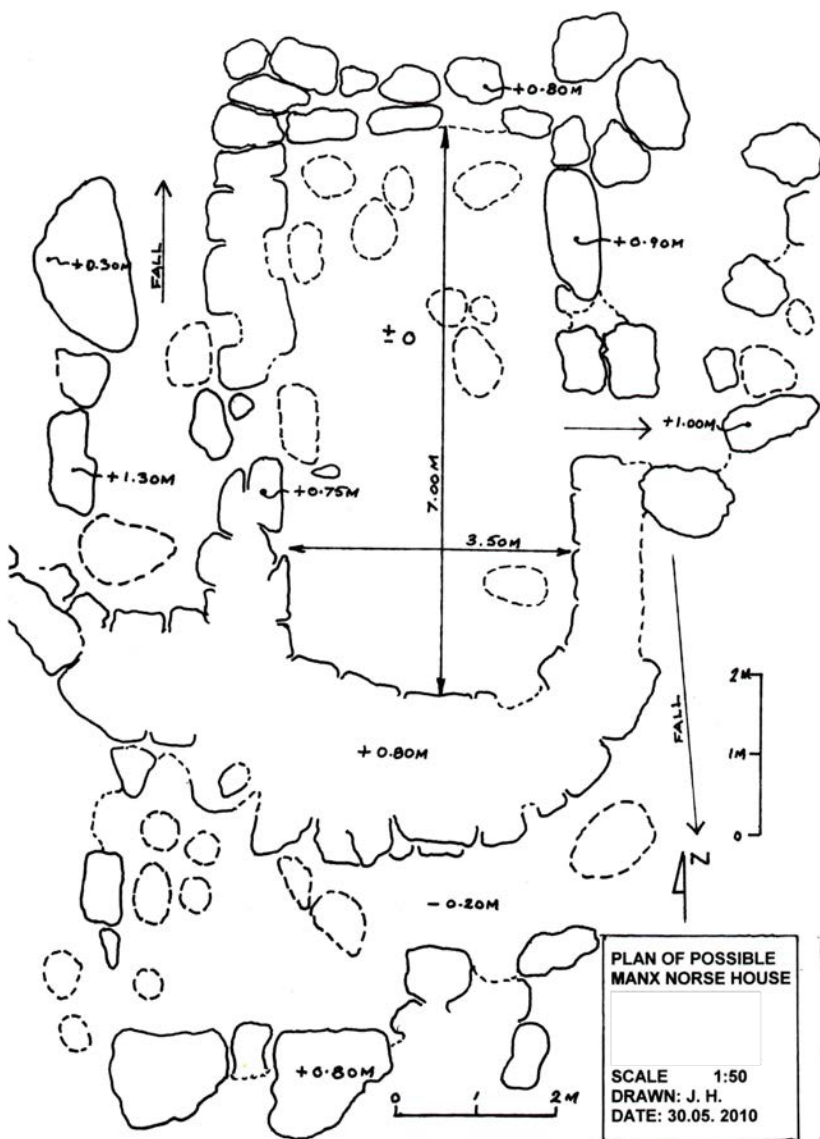
Nonetheless, some structures of Norse character do remain untouched by later settlement. The more rugged southern and eastern coasts of Coll, overgrown with heather and bracken, retain the outlines of buildings likely dating to the Norse period at convenient sheltered bays and headlands. On land close to the Norse place-name Fiskary and the bay of Hyne, a mound overlooking the shore supports a stone-built setting exhibiting the opposing entrances and distinctive plan of a Viking-Age rectilinear house (**Figure 16**). Yet again, the walls stand substantially wider than observed elsewhere in the British Isles, suggesting a local tradition of architecture influencing Norse styles. Nearby structures at Fiskary and Hyne also show potential in affirming the early medieval occupation of the area, with the surrounding coast offering several beaching sites and access to inland resources, particularly peat (Batey *pers. comm.*; Jim Hill *pers. comm.*)(**Figure 17**). These structures significantly merit further investigation to decidedly ascertain a sequence of occupation. Identification of additional key Norse settlements around the islands is contingent on the changing landscape.



**Figure 15:** Viewshed attainable from the headland of Ceann a' Mhara, facing East across Balephuil Bay and into the heart of Tiree. Loch a' Phuill is also visible from this vantage, reiterating the accessibility of the inland lakes.  
Photo: Author's own

The majority of Norse farmstead place-names still used on Coll, along with stray pottery finds, are distributed along the northern coastal strip of machair grassland. As such, this supports the perspective of Norse settlement on optimal fertile land, maintained using lasting divisions of management as previously discussed. Sorisdale, located at the northern most tip of Coll, illustrates the inherent value of these tracts of land in offering access for boats and ideal land for both pasture and cultivation (**Figure 18**). Unfortunately, the vulnerability of the machair is also apparent, particularly in the dynamic dune

systems on the exposed Atlantic coasts. This is particularly evident at Hough, on the western coast of Tiree, where any structures evident are soon covered by sandblow. In addition the area surrounding nearby Loch Bhasapòl and Corraigbeg, which draws attention regarding Viking-Age wintering of vessels and the multiple burials mentioned in the Old Statistical Account, is similarly scoured by wind and sand. A wide range of approaches are necessitated in order to accommodate these impacts to the archaeological record.



**Figure 16:** Plan drawing of the Norse house at Fiskary. The walls remain substantial, particularly to the South. Credit: Jim Hill



**Figure 17:** The bay at Fiskary, on the south coast of Coll. This inlet is but one of many sheltered beaching sites afforded by the islands.  
Photo: Author's own



**Figure 18:** The machair plains at Sorisdale, sloping to the sheltered bay with evidence of continual occupation from prehistoric to modern times. The mound centred in the image holds a dominant position over the surrounding fertile landscape. Photo: Author's own



## ii. Discussion

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In surveying the landscape of Coll and Tiree, several aspects concerning the identification of Viking-Age Norse settlement sites have become clear. Principally, the search for diagnostically Norse buildings must confront their lasting influence on settlement history inherent to the context of these islands, accepting the dominant impact of Norse incomers inferred from the range of sources discussed. Parker Pearson (2012: 417) emphasises the “profound changes” in Hebridean life brought by the inception of Norse longhouse construction on South Uist, separating the period from preceding Iron Age ways of dwelling. However, these structures must be seen as an adaptation of imported tastes to local conditions, lasting long into the medieval period and beyond. Subsequent continuity and refinement of the longhouse form may go some distance to explain the muted nature of Norse settlement sites on Tiree and Coll.

Excavations of a terrace site on the south side of Gunna, situated between Tiree and Coll, reveal a “process of replacement and re-building of settlement” on the same site (James 1998: 29). The earliest phases in the sequence are late medieval in date, with the site’s origins potentially stretching back into prehistory. This trend is repeatedly evinced at sites throughout the islands, such as Sorisdale and Breachacha on Coll, as well as Kirkapol and Druim a’ Choirce on Tiree. Dodgshon (1993: 420) notes the use of perishable material with the construction of turf or wattle buildings in Scotland from documentary sources. The survival of such structures is therefore threatened by a continual process of demolition for use of the material in manuring fields (Fenton 1978: 14; Dodgshon 1993: 422). Interestingly, this also highlights a strong lasting tradition in the settlement history of the islands, from the onset of the longhouse tradition of the Viking Age. Single long-lived farmsteads such as the turf- and stone-walled longhouse sunken into the sand at Cille Pheadair, may parallel sites on Tiree and Coll from the tenth and eleventh centuries (Parker Pearson 2012: 418). Yet these turf structures were likely replaced by dry-stone single-celled buildings; an example of which is recorded on Gunna (Structure F), dating in this case to the fifteenth century (James 1998: 29). Further replacement with “massively thick-walled” single-celled structures appears to anticipate the early nineteenth-century Hebridean blackhouse tradition, which tended to agglomerate several units (Roussell 1934: 29, 33; James 1998: 29). The developmental influences of this lineage are apparent in the region, including the Balephetrish structure on Tiree and several farmsteads observable on Coll (**Figure 19**). Thus the identification of Scandinavian structures with contexts dateable to the Viking Age is complicated by the resulting later modifications and adaptations over a history of continual occupation.



**Figure 19:** Late medieval settlement North of Arinagour, Coll. Multiple such sites are visible across the central belt of the island. 3 adjacent structures accompany this building in a recurring complex of stone-built farmhouses. Photo: Author’s own

Similarly, aspects of continuity must also be acknowledged as stemming from the preceding pattern and character of settlement on the islands. Not only does this perspective reiterate the influences and negotiation of local architectural styles, but also offers profound implications for the nature of contact between Norse and indigenous groups. The introduction of the longhouse form presents a series of distinct characteristics and corresponding use of interior space linked to Scandinavian life, with which to draw comparison. The Norse structure identified on Coll (**Figure 16**) is notable in matching the shape and form of the Manx examples at Doarlish Cashen and Cronk ny Merriu — particularly appropriate considering the context of intense maritime links with the Northern Channel. Gelling (1970: 81) also suggests a date for this traditional house-plan ranging from the later ninth century to no later than the mid-thirteenth century, following the cessation of the Norse kingdom in the Isles. This may raise the expectation of detecting archetypal Norse longhouses, established in the earliest phases of the Viking Age to be later re-built and modified into the medieval period.

However, several features of structures attributed to the Norse occupation also show accommodation of local practice. Structures on South Uist are regarded as “superficially Norse”, yet Hebridean in their sunken construction and single-skinned form; a characteristic attributed to the

machair environment (Sharples & Parker Pearson 1999: 58). Similarly, the platter-ware ceramic tradition unique to the Hebrides during the Viking Age communicates a substantial continuity with preceding technological forms, albeit in an innovative style. Taken together, these continuities are highlighted in the debate concerning lasting contacts with the indigenous population that defined the context of Norse colonisation. From this perspective, the retention of the preceding Iron Age pattern in Viking-Age settlement distribution, with no interceding abandonment, does not represent a cataclysmic displacement of indigenous occupants. Instead it is argued that the main disruption would have been confined to the upper echelons of the local hierarchy, in a focus on land ownership, which saw land management come into the hands of Norse aristocratic incomers (Armit 1996: 203). Sharples and Parker Pearson (1999: 58) note the logic of retaining inhabitants already skilled in working the land and building in the local environment. The result would then reciprocally impact the architectural style and social relations of both local and colonist, demonstrated in the subsequent traditions in settlement and pottery production. Such an interpretation of the archaeology thus far would fit with the view granted by place-name evidence that largely emphasises a Norse consolidation of land valuation rather than settlement redistribution.

Adaptation to varying social and political realities is a hallmark of Norse interactions during the Viking-Age, facilitating contacts with numerous groups throughout the British Isles. Coll and Tìree are situated centrally in this network of contacts stretching down the western coast to Ireland and the Irish Sea. Maritime communications and the accompanying material culture were intrinsic to the Norse way of life in the surrounding region, further influencing the development of settlement on the islands themselves. A hitherto neglected element concerning the Christian monastic presence on Tìree and Coll once again reinforces this fact. Given that the earliest records of Viking incursion into the Inner Hebrides are found in the context of raiding on monastic settlements, notably Iona, Norse settlers on Coll and Tìree would have been exposed to Christianity from the outset. In tending to follow pre-existing Celtic land divisions as primary settlement units, ecclesiastical sites would appear to have been largely undisturbed, even avoided, by the arriving Norse population (Johnston 1991: 257). Religion is likely to have afforded a powerful arena for cultural interactions on Coll and Tìree, in a similar fashion to many contexts of Norse contact in the Irish Sea region and the wider Viking world, particularly materialised in Manx sculpture from the tenth century. Johnston (1991: 258) demonstrates this discourse in suggesting a tradition of proprietary chapels, adhering to and reinforcing Norse land divisions under the control of aristocratic families on Tìree and Coll. A close association of chapel sites with *ounceland* units indicates the lasting stability of this system, that in turn would have precipitated later parochial organisation. The development of these social structures also heavily impacted Norse expansion into the North Atlantic, with a substantial contingent from the Inner Hebrides bringing the

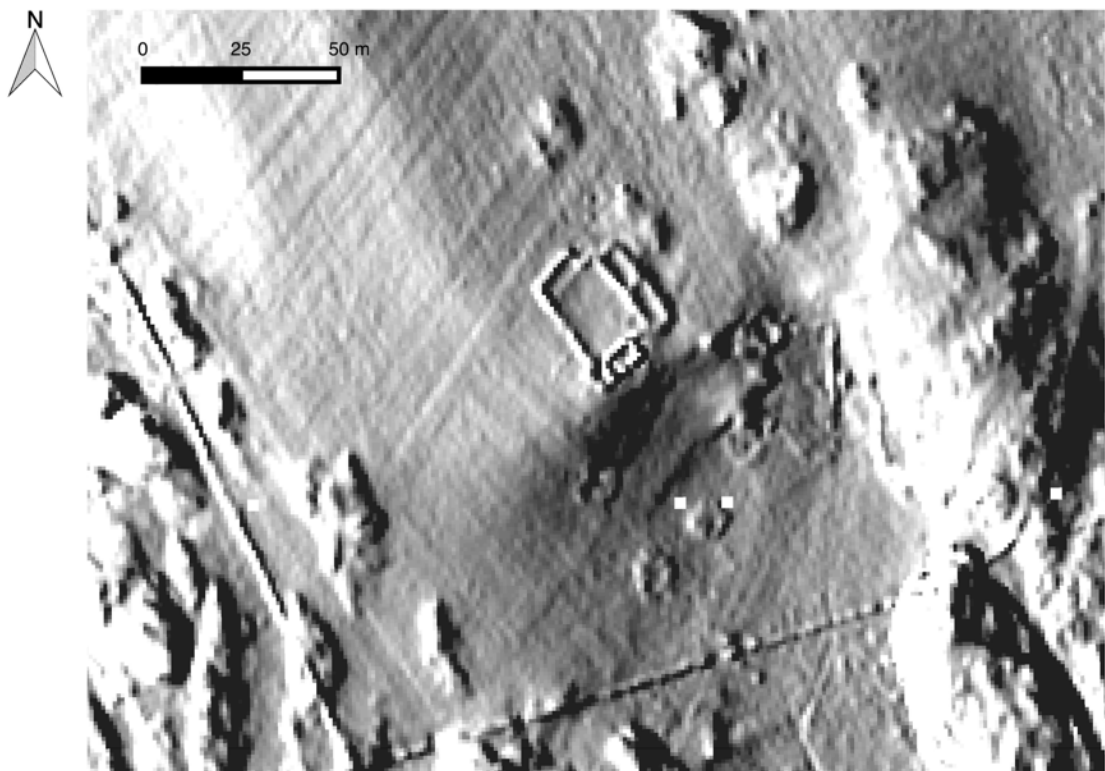
cult of the Celtic Saint Columba to Iceland (Andersen 1991: 137; *Landnámabók* 1972: 23). As such, an investigation into the history of major chapel sites on Tiree and Coll will provide additional insight into economic and power structures through the medium by which they were organised and communicated.

Both Coll and Tiree offer numerous lines of enquiry that demand urgent attention. A comparison between their respective local landscapes and settlement patterns, as well as in the wider context of the Inner Hebrides and across the Western Isles, will present an invaluable and unparalleled assessment of Norse habitation in the region. In light of the opportunities presented, it is important to address the factors that have obstructed such analyses in the past.

## Limitations

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It has been noted that the Inner Hebrides remain conspicuously deficient in published studies of Norse archaeology relating to settlement sites, despite the extent of influence inferred from other sources. The reasons for this can naturally pertain to issues in reconciling onomastic and documentary sources closely with archaeological material in the field, hindered further by the complexities of the local environment. Nonetheless when placed in the known context from the surrounding isles, this absence of evidence points to questions yet to be answered. Future efforts to redress this neglect will take into account those factors that frustrate the understanding of Norse settlement on Coll and Tiree.



**Figure 20:** The palimpsest complex at Druim a' Choirce. Footings of two long barns are incorporated into the northeast edge of a later stone enclosure. A modern house lies abandoned on the southern edge. Several boundaries and structural traces throughout this area emphasise the longevity of occupation and the older features subsumed beneath later construction.

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As discussed above, the complexities observed in Hebridean architectural development from the longhouse form are likely to complicate the survival of many sites to modern day. Frequent demolition of ageing structures, built with perishable materials and superseded by re-building settlements on the same site, preclude many opportunities for excavation of a pristine Norse farmstead. Such a settlement history also highlights the assumptions inherent in identifying a diagnostically Norse structure,

preempting the character of changes in material culture that have accompanied more studied sites in the British Isles. In this regard, the Hebrides have already proven to hold unique exceptions in material interchange, demanding consideration in their own terms. This stresses the importance of establishing a sequence in settlement morphology on Tiree and Coll, in order to elucidate the changes that have taken place in the landscape.

The machair environment itself plays a substantial role in both the sequence and later recovery of settlement sites. Crawford (1978: 58) provides a thorough assessment of shell sand as an archaeological medium, noting severe issues presented in the erosion of machairs by wind and mobile dune systems. Excavation in this environment necessitates painstaking measures of retrieval, with increased difficulty in detecting sites due to sand cover and sun glare. While rabbits are noted in their disturbance of deposits, it is interesting to compare their role in raising occupation debris to the surface of settlement mounds in South Uist to their absence in Tiree, potentially inhibiting this mode of discovery (Sharples & Parker Pearson 1999: 45). Most significantly, Crawford (1978: 59) emphasises the need to live near sites, ensuring that fleeting moments of exposure are not wasted where old land surfaces might be uncovered. This also allows frequent visitation of a site year-round, in differing conditions, allowing optimum and experienced investigation.

A greater investment in counteracting these factors has also been suggested following attempts to survey the archaeology underlying place-name evidence in the Inner Hebrides. Onomastic study has identified several lost townships erased by sand-blow over the course of time, yet it is also important to consider the fluidity and displacement of names. Using present surviving structures as a guide, Leslie and Elizabeth Alcock (1980: 67) state that efforts must work backwards in establishing the trajectory of sites that might overlay Norse rural settlements attributed to the surviving place-names. The methods used in the most recent landscape survey presented in this paper are shown to be limited in detecting surviving early sites, largely due to the changing land surface. Where buildings are seen to have been cleared, such as at Kirkapol, Tiree, a methodology common to prehistoric settlement is suggested utilising phosphate analysis, geophysical prospecting and open-area excavation (Alcock & Alcock 1980: 64). It is hoped that future geophysical analysis of the so-called Giant's Grave in Kirkapol will offer some insight into a possible Norse burial on Tiree, with the opportunity to investigate additional areas (James *pers. comm.*). The aim remains an understanding of the succession of settlement forms on the islands with a corresponding analysis of associated material culture and economy.

The final major obstruction to the identification of Norse settlement on Coll and Tiree concerns the neglect of the region in contrast to the Northern Isles and more recently the Outer Hebrides. Norse

contexts encountered in Orkney and Shetland have encouraged repeated excavation, supported by a rich resource in historical references. The distinctive inception of rectilinear longhouses has somewhat shaped assumptions as to the identification of Norse settlements, with little interest in the novel forms that might materialise in a Hebridean context. Identification of a Norse pit-house resembling ninth-century sunken structures in Norway, at Hamar, Unst in Shetland, in addition to structural re-occupation of Pictish wheelhouses at Old Scatness, provides crucial depth to the debate that would benefit in being further applied to the Western Isles (Bond 2013: 129; Duckbill & Bond 2014: 47). Excavations on North Uist have served to demonstrate some aspects of this fluid and innovative cultural interchange, yet still held expectations of Norse migration as “obliterative in terms of local material culture” (Crawford 1981: 267). While this debate continues, the Inner Hebrides constitute a crucial test bed for these presumptions. Comparison within and between these island regions is vital to understanding the nature of Norse colonisation contingent on local contacts.

## **Concluding Remarks – Future Research**

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Tiree and Coll show immense promise for the investigation of a richly settled Norse intercultural landscape. Situated within a zone of maritime contacts along the western seascape, these islands can elucidate the complex social relations borne in an important milieu concerning Christianity, land management, political overlordship and local material and linguistic interchange. This study has demonstrated the range of material gathered thus far, as well as the questions raised when applying these sources to an archaeological assessment of Norse presence. Crucially, it is clear that a more dedicated future strategy is needed to approach the succession of settlement associated with Viking-Age incomers.

Future projects would prioritise efforts to establish the sequence of settlement development on Coll and Tiree, considering lasting impacts on the management of land units and respective economy. A focus on the Norse period must consider aspects of continuity inherent to the strategy of colonisation. A wide range of methods must also be brought to bear on the unique machair landscape, with the appropriate consideration of how the local environment shapes settlement form and location. Key sites that particularly merit further survey and excavation include the multiple structures at Fiskary, and the settlement of Sorisdale on Coll, with the aim of securing a stratified insight into prime settlement locations at beaching sites and the northern machair strip. Analysis of closely neighbouring settlements could provide additional data on the carrying capacity of the local area, in order to validate hypotheses regarding the fertility of these lands. Prospection at Cornaigmore and Cornaigbeg on Tiree, while

certain to encounter complications in archaeological retrieval, can be regarded as a priority to investigate the extent of detection possible in local soil, in addition to the study of medieval structures similar to those visible on Coll. Ultimately, through persistent and experienced engagement with the archaeological environment local to the islands, a familiarity and understanding of the period of Norse activity will emerge.



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