Norse Settlement in the Outer Hebrides

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Recent work on the Norse settlement of Scotland has focused on the settlements of the Northern Isles. In this article we present some new results from the less intensively studied Western Isles. A detailed survey of South Uist has revealed a large number of settlements on the machair plain on the west coast of the island. These settlements are closely related to the pre-existing native settlement pattern and suggest settlement continuity from the middle of the first millennium BC to the 14th century AD. In the 14th century there appears to be an abandonment of the machair plain and a movement onto the adjacent blacklands. Two of these Norse settlements have been excavated and a large amount of evidence showing the nature of the Norse settlement has been found. We take the opportunity to discuss the structural remains so far exposed and an architectural sequence is suggested. A number of diagnostic artefact types have been recovered and these yield accurate dates for the sequence of development. In a general discussion of the results it is argued that the settlement evidence does not support the argument for a widespread slaughter of the indigenous population when the Norse arrived on the islands. Instead, we would argue that continuity is the principal feature of the archaeological record in the later part of the first millennium AD. The principal disruption appears to coincide with the transfer of the islands to the Scottish crown and might represent a significant reorientation of the island economy.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years archaeological exploration of the Norse settlement of the North Atlantic has been an area of increasing interest to scholars in a range of countries. Important new work is underway on settlements in Greenland, Iceland, the Faroes and Norway. Much of this work has not yet been fully published but in recent years there has been an exemplary series of publications which places a considerable amount of information in the public domain.¹ Much of this new work deals with the environmental and ecological basis of the settlement on the North Atlantic and has seen the application of a range of techniques unavailable to earlier scholars. This work has re-emphasized the quality of the archaeological record in these northern areas and has yielded evidence of the richness as well as the diversity of resources exploited.

In Britain the principal focus of research (excluding the urban settlements of Dublin and York) has been in the Northern Isles and Caithness. These areas have the benefit of a considerable background of important research carried out in the first half of this century. Settlements such as Jarlshof, Shetland (Hamilton 1956), Birsay, Orkney (Curle 1982) and Freswick, Caithness (Curle 1939) provided invaluable evidence for the nature of Norse settlements throughout the North Atlantic. Recent work has involved
re-excavation or new work on these famous sites (e.g. Hunter 1986, Morris 1997) as well as extensive excavation of new sites, most importantly Tuquoy (Owen 1994) and Poole, Orkney (Hunter et al. 1994), The Biggins (Crawford 1985) and Sandwick, Shetland (Bigelow 1985).

In contrast to this activity noted above, fieldwork on the Western Isles (Fig. 1) has been extremely limited. The only recent excavations are those of the extensive settlement on the Udal in North Uist (Crawford 1986; Selkirk 1996), a smaller settlement at Barvas on Lewis (Armit 1996:192–193) and a cemetery at Bhalto on Lewis (Welander et al. 1987, Cowie et al. 1994, Armit 1996:195–202, Dunwell et al. forthcoming). In the 1950s a 14 m-long house was partly excavated at Drimore, South Uist (Maclaren 1974). Other unambiguous material evidence of the Norse occupation is restricted to a handful of burials (Crawford 1987, Fig. 31), three chance finds of silver ring money on Lewis and gold finger rings on North Uist.

Fig. 1. The location of the Outer Hebrides, showing the sites and places mentioned in the text.
(Graham-Campbell 1976, Armit 1996:194–195), a bronze pin from Bornais (South Uist) and the famous chessmen from the Uigsands on Lewis (Taylor 1978).

This relative imbalance in the extent of archaeological work between the Northern and Western Isles of Scotland could be related to the historical significance of the Northern Isles and the importance of the early work on historical sites such as Orphir and Birsay on Orkney and Jarlshof on Shetland. However, the imbalance is visible in other periods and is more likely to be related to the uneven practice of archaeology in Scotland than to either the inherent attractions of the archaeological resource in the Northern Isles or the unimportance of the Western Isles in the context of the Viking settlement of the North Atlantic. The Western Isles sit astride the sea route from Norway to Dublin and it is clear that any movement down the western seaboard of the British Isles would inevitably involve contact with or provisioning from the islands. Furthermore, work on the historical records suggests that the inhabitants may have had an important part to play in the colonization of Iceland (Andersen 1991:137).

The potential for a detailed analysis of Norse settlement patterns on the islands has been transformed by the recognition of a distinctive regional type of Norse pottery (Lane 1990). Various ceramic forms found at the Udal, North Uist are restricted to the period from the 9th to the 11th century AD. These were present in very large numbers and some of the forms, most notably the platter, are recognizable even as small sherds. On the basis of the Udal sequence, Lane was able to identify Norse occupation on a number of settlements by the reanalysis of old excavations. Furthermore, fieldwork in the islands has resulted in the recovery of dateable material from eroding settlement mounds and it is suggested that a detailed survey of the Norse settlement of this landscape might be possible (Armit 1996, Parker Pearson 1996).

THE LANDSCAPE

This article presents the results of recent fieldwork on the island of South Uist, a large island in the southern Western Isles, and is part of a broader campaign in the southern Outer Hebrides (Brannigan & Foster 1995, Gilbertson et al. 1996). Our fieldwork involves both survey and excavation and is intended to provide a detailed analysis of settlement patterns from the first millennium BC to the present day. In the first stage of this fieldwork we focused on the Iron Age settlement patterns and this is in the process of final publication (Parker Pearson & Sharples in press). The second stage, underway since 1994, deals with the Norse settlement of the island.

It is important to understand the topography of South Uist (see Fig. 2) as the various landforms influence the settlement pattern and its archaeological visibility. The island is roughly rectangular with its long axis oriented north–south. The east coast is extremely rugged, with mountains reaching up to 620 m and agricultural land restricted to small isolated pockets. As one moves west the landscape flattens out and one enters a zone, known as the blacklands, now covered in peat which has provided little more than rough grazing in recent years. Adjacent to this is an area of lochs, large and small, and rock outcrops, which is the location for most of the modern settlements. Between these settlements and the sea lies an area of shell sand known as the machair, which is the most important part of the contemporary agricultural landscape. Three sea lochs penetrate the east coast of the island and are an important topographic feature. These are exceptionally long and almost reach as far as the machair of the west coast. These lochs provide good shelter for local fishing boats throughout the year, in contrast to the west coast, which has only one safe summer anchorage.

The machair is a thick layer of calcareous
Fig. 2. South Uist, showing the topography, the lochs and the machair. The location of the principal excavated Norse sites and the broch at Dun Vulan are shown.
sand deposited since the last glaciation (Ritchie 1979, Owen et al. 1996). The machair probably began to form by ca 3700 BC and by 2000 BC an extensive machair plain similar to that of today was present. The machair of South Uist is relatively stable today, with erosion and deposition concentrated on the dunes that run along the foreshore, but it is important to note that the landform is inherently unstable. Recent records suggest massive erosion and deposition is possible in a very short period of time. Townships have been abandoned owing to inundation by sand, and islands have been separated from the mainland. It is therefore possible that the coastline in the Viking period was significantly different in location but probably not in character from the coastline of today.

A number of characteristics make site recognition relatively straightforward on the machair. Most of the settlements now survive as mounds. The size varies from significant and impressive monuments visible from a considerable distance to insignificant rises, which are often dwarfed by the natural variations in the machair topography. These mounds were probably created by both the accumulation of archaeological sediments as a result of deliberate deposition and the erosion of the surrounding unconsolidated sand. Only compact and organically bonded archaeological deposits will resist aeolian erosion once the turf cover is broken.

The archaeological significance of these mounds can be confirmed by the surface exposure of artefacts, animal bones and marine shells. This material is usually brought to the surface by rabbits, which are present in large numbers on the machair. When the rabbits tunnel into an archaeological settlement, they bring to the surface material from all the contexts penetrated by the burrow. This often includes diagnostic potsherds and other artefacts. The machair is also regularly ploughed and this truncates archaeological contexts bringing artefactual material to the surface.

The machair topography varies along the length of the coastal plain. Areas such as Hallan and Cille Pheadair, in the southern part of the island, are covered in large undulating dunes probably formed in relatively recent times, whereas areas such as Bornais and Iochdair, in the middle and northern parts of the island, have an almost horizontal plain extending back from the high frontal dune system on the present coastline. Site recognition in the former areas is obviously difficult and distributions are difficult to interpret but in the latter areas site recognition is high allowing for a more complete understanding of the settlement pattern.

In contrast to the machair, site recognition in the blacklands is much more problematic. The visible archaeological remains are largely the result of recent 18th- and 19th-century settlement with prehistoric monuments limited to isolated monuments such as Neolithic chambered cairns, and brochs and wheelhouses of the Middle Iron Age. The shallow acidic nature of the soils in this landscape discourages rabbit colonization and destroys the bones and shells which make site recognition so straightforward on the machair.

South Uist has many features typical of the other islands of the Western Isles. It is not the most fertile but it is certainly not the most infertile of these islands. Many of the islands are dominated by large areas of blanket peat or bare rock, which makes any kind of arable agriculture impossible. The most distinctive feature of the landscape is the machair. Shell sand deposits are found in pockets all along the west coast of the Western Isles and in some areas these deposits are continuous but nowhere do they compare with the extensive strip that extends from the southern tip of South Uist to the northwest corner of North Uist. The relatively high recognition of archaeological settlements in this zone makes it an important region for landscape studies.
Between 1993 and 1996 the entire machair strip along the west coast of South Uist was fieldworked (Parker Pearson 1996). This was designed to complement fieldwork in the mountainous east coast by Moreland (pers. comm.) and in the blacklands around the townships of Milton and Cill Donnain (Fleming forthcoming). Both of these surveys identified extensive evidence for recent (15th–19th century) settlement but evidence for earlier periods is restricted to that found at Cill Donnain (Fleming & Woolf 1992) and Norse settlements have not been located.

The machair survey involved an area approximately 2 km wide and 33 km long and archaeological sites, mostly settlements, were located up to the summer of 1997. These sites range in date from the Early Bronze Age to the post-Medieval period. To understand the nature of the Norse colonization it is necessary to examine the historical context of the settlement pattern. The most readily identified and frequently located settlements belong to the Middle Iron Age (100 BC–AD 300). These are characterized by very distinctive and often highly decorated ceramics which have been found on twenty settlements (Fig. 3a). Less characteristic plain wares indicate a possible Middle Iron Age date for another seven sites (not marked on Fig 3a). These settlements often form part of mound clusters with the other mounds producing pottery of later date. The mound clusters are evenly spaced along the machair at about 1 km intervals in a pattern similar to the territorial ordering of the pre-Clearance townships (Parker Pearson 1996). This contrasts markedly with the distribution of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age settlements, which are clustered in three locations on the machair plain.

Late Iron Age (AD 300–AD 800) ceramic traditions are much less distinctive (Lane 1990); there is a decline in the amount of decoration on the vessel and the range of motifs used, but fabrics remain the same. Consequently, the identification of settlements is much more difficult, relying on vessel form, which changes slightly. Only eight definite settlements have been identified and many of these were identified through excavation. All but one of the sites is located on or close to a mound that produced Middle Iron Age ceramics. It seems unlikely that this pattern represents a decline in the number of settlements. It probably simply represents the relative difficulty in identifying diagnostic ceramics.

The transition to the Norse period involves a significant change in the ceramics. Decoration is absent and forms are restricted to bowls and cups with sagging bases and flat rims. However, grass-marked bases are distinctive and a very characteristic flat disc or platter is introduced during the Norse period. Twenty-one settlements can be identified (Fig. 3b) and these belong to mound clusters with Middle and Late Iron Age settlements. Not all mound clusters contain clearly identifiable Norse settlements but since many of the mounds identified by the survey have not produced diagnostic pottery, another five or so may potentially date to the Norse period, if each mound cluster had a Norse component.

In contrast to the previous period, Late or post-Medieval settlement on the machair is rare. Only two definite and one possible settlement are known. The local pottery includes diagnostic decoration and fabrics, and imported glazed wares do occur, so this distribution is likely to represent a real depopulation of the machair zone. This pattern is confirmed by the cartographic evidence from the 16th and 19th centuries (the maps by Pont, Blau and Bold) which indicates a settlement pattern dominated by township settlements in the blacklands immediately adjacent to the machair. Settlement in the machair is restricted to the two townships identified by the survey and a scatter of isolated structures.

The survey of the machair has produced
some very significant patterns. The basic settlement pattern appears to have remained fairly constant from the Middle Iron Age through to the end of the Norse period. Distinct clusters of mounds are found spaced approximately every 1 km along the machair. The number of mounds in each cluster varies considerably. Some clusters have lines of many small mounds and others have one or two very large mounds. Mounds are not always easy to date but where visibility and artefact recovery are straightforward, Middle Iron Age, Late Iron Age and Norse periods seem to be represented in each cluster. The pattern suggests continuity of settlement for over a millennium with continual rebuilding and minor locational shift around the settlement focus. These results confirm the evidence from the Udal, North Uist (Crawford 1986) where a substantial settle-
ment was established in the Middle Iron Age. The location of this settlement then shifts between the north and south mounds for two millennia before abandonment of the machair in the 17th century. Our evidence would suggest that continuity into the post-Medieval period, as seen at the Udal, is an unusual feature on the Uists.

Clearly the machair cannot be looked at in isolation. We have already highlighted the post-Medieval settlement of the blacklands and it must be assumed that this ecological zone was exploited throughout the Iron Age and the Norse period. Indeed, if the distribution of chambered cairns is any indication, this area may have been the focus for early prehistoric settlement. However, it is assumed that the growth of blanket peat in the second millennium BC led to the abandonment of these areas and ultimately to the reorganization and intensive settlement of the machair.

The Middle Iron Age pattern is again instructive. Detailed analysis of the location of brochs indicates that, with one exception, they are situated by the lochs that lie between the machair and the peatlands and possibly control access to the summer grazing in the mountains (Parker Pearson & Sharples forthcoming). The one exceptional broch, Dun Vulan, lies on the west beside the sea and dominates the only natural harbour on that coast (see below). These brochs are architecturally very different from the Middle Iron Age wheelhouses, which are the only houses found in the machair settlements. Wheelhouses are also occasionally found built into chambered cairns in the peatlands and these locations suggest seasonal occupation associated with grazing. The significance of the brochs is a subject of some controversy but we would argue that they represent an indigenous elite defining their status by architectural prominence and locational isolation (Sharples & Parker Pearson 1997). This pattern would suggest that the blacklands were not suitable for a permanent agricultural-based settlement and that though Norse settlements might be found in this area, particularly seasonally occupied shieling sites, the main focus is on the machair.

Our work on the island suggests that the principal discontinuity in the settlement pattern of the island of South Uist did not occur when the Vikings arrived on the islands but after the islands had been incorporated into the Scottish kingdom. The precise date of the abandonment of the settlements can only be established by detailed excavation and this can also clarify the nature of the Viking interface.

BORNAIS AND CILLE PHEADAIR

The original focus for the project was the central part of the island. This area, including Cill Donnain midden and Bornaais, had been the subject of intensive field survey prior to our arrival and required the collection of securely dated stratigraphic material to further the analysis of the settlement patterns. Our initial interest was in the broch at Dun Vulan (Fig. 2) which lay on the coastal promontory to the west of the machair plain. Excavation indicated that the site had an Early Iron Age occupation between 800 and 400 BC and had then been continuously occupied from 200 BC to AD 800 but there was no evidence to suggest any Viking or Norse occupation despite a late and post-Medieval presence (Parker Pearson & Sharples forthcoming). This might seem unusual given the characteristic coastal location of the settlement and the uniquely good harbourage that is available at the promontory but it confirms the general conclusions of the machair survey that broch locations are unusual and that the Norse settlement continues the occupation of the machair plain.

In 1993 we decided to explore the large mounds that dominate the machair plain of Upper Bornaais (Fig. 4). Trial excavation and detailed surface collection in 1994 suggested that the occupation sequence is long, from
Fig. 4. A plan of the mounds at Bornais showing the excavated areas.
the Middle Iron Age through the Norse period, and that the stratigraphic, artefactual and structural preservation was excellent. These settlement mounds would clearly provide valuable evidence for the nature of the Norse settlement on the island. Excavation of the three Bornais mounds has continued every summer since 1994 and, in the past two years, funding from Historic Scotland and the University of Wales, Cardiff has enabled a substantial investigation of the mounds.

In 1996 the opportunity arose to excavate a contemporary site in the southern part of South Uist at Cille Pheadair. The coastline in this area is beset with severe erosion by the winter storms. Recently discovered in the middle of a 6-m high sand face exposed on the dune front were the remains of buildings and occupation layers associated with a bone comb of Norse date. This site was clearly threatened by erosion, and funding from Historic Scotland was made available for substantial excavation. The machair survey of this township indicates a more dispersed pattern of mounds, in contrasts to the nucleated pattern found at Bornais, and it therefore seemed to be a likely spot for comparative excavation.

The two settlements chosen for excavation have proved to be fundamentally different and will provide a useful contrast when a detailed analysis of the material culture and economic information is completed. Geophysical examination (Fig. 5) has shown that the Bornais settlement is extensive. Buildings are visible over an area of ca. 0.8 ha which includes two substantial settlement mounds (2 and 3 in Fig. 5). Furthermore, excavation has revealed Norse houses and activity on top of the earlier deposits in the adjacent settlement mound (mound 1) to the south. The main settlement area seems to be divided into five discrete clusters of buildings, which may represent independent farms. The two clearest clusters (Figs 5, 2B and 2C) appear to consist of three rectangular buildings arranged around a yard, opening to the south.

In contrast, the settlement at Cille Pheadair (Fig. 6) appears to be much smaller. The overall extent of the layers exposed in the coastal section indicates a settlement mound 40 m long and excavation indicates that the edge of the settlement mound is less than 35 m to the east of the sea cliff. The overall width is difficult to estimate with certainty given the erosion of the western edge but the structural evidence suggests that very little has been lost and this coincides with the views of local informants who have only recently noticed the remains on the coastal section. The excavation suggests that the occupation was dominated by a single house with associated ancillary structures, forming a farmstead which was replaced three times over a period of four centuries.

The other principal contrast between the two settlements is the presence of an underlying Late Iron Age settlement at Bornais that is absent at Cille Pheadair. The latter site is underlain by sterile windblown sand. However, this relationship is more complex than it first appears. The Cille Pheadair complex lies only 500 m south-southwest of two Iron Age mounds (sites 63 and 64). Two settlements (sites 88 and 81) have been reported 50 m to the north and 200 m to the south of the excavated site (RCAHMS), but these are undated and have since been destroyed by the sea.

Both settlements support the evidence from the field survey that the Norse settlement pattern is very similar to that of the preceding Late Iron Age. Sites are located either on top of existing settlements or immediately adjacent to them. It conforms to a pattern of localized movement around a settlement core which seems to have been established by the second century BC.

THE STRUCTURES

The excavations at Bornais have until re-
cently involved only small-scale sampling to characterize the structure and sequence of each of the mounds and to obtain samples for analysis of the economy. The excavation of Cille Pheadair has been more intensive and has revealed a sequence of structures built one on top of the other. Both settlements have yielded material dating back to at least the 10th century and, as neither site has yet been totally excavated, a 9th century occupation for both settlements seems likely. Both settlements appear to have been abandoned before the end of the 14th century. Excavation in 1996 located the site of the Bornais township on the blacklands immediately to the east of the Norse settlements which has produced local late Medieval wares and imports dating from the 16th to the 19th century (Marshall & Parker Pearson 1996).

Fifteen buildings (7 at Bornais and 8 Cille Pheadair) have been exposed during the excavations of these settlements and the more substantial and complete houses are illustrated in Fig. 7. Two groups of three buildings appear to be recognizable: an early group of large houses dates from the 10th to the 12th centuries AD (Figs 7D and 7E, one

Fig. 5. The gradiometer survey of mounds 2 and 3 at Bornais. The roughly square enclosure was an animal pen constructed in the late 19th century. Norse buildings are indicated by high readings or high readings surrounding low readings. They appear to be concentrated in five discrete rectangular or square foci (2A, 2B, 2C, 3A, 3B) but other isolated structures are observable, notably just outside the enclosure at X.
house is only partially excavated and not illustrated) and a later group of small houses dating from the 12th to 14th centuries AD (Fig. 7A, 7B and 7C). The earlier structures have not been excavated completely or even exposed but they do bear similarities to Dri-more (Fig. 7F), the only published settlement from the Western Isles (Maclaren 1974), and to the phase IX structure at the Udal, North Uist (Crawford 1974, Fig 3).

All of these buildings are sunken floored, dug down into the sand, and their principal structural feature is a stone revetment wall defining the interior of the house. The height of this wall is the principal evidence for the depth to which the structure was sunk but subsequent erosion or deliberate robbing can give a misleading impression of where the old ground surface was. At Bornais the two earlier structures have walls surviving up to 1.3 m and 0.8 m high. In contrast the latest structure on mound 3 has a wall standing only 0.25 m high. This might suggest that the building tradition is changing to one of above-ground construction and certainly the recent forms of traditional architecture give no indication of subterranean building (Symonds 1997). However, this sequence should be viewed with caution. The later structures could have been truncated by robbing and cultivation, and recent building traditions were adapted to the very different environment of the shallow soils of the blacklands where subterranean houses would be impossible.

The evidence from Cille Pheadair does not suggest any significant difference in depth. All the houses are sunk approximately 0.5 m into the sand. The last house was surrounded by a gully, presumably to collect water from the eaves of the roof. The original ground surface has not survived but the position of the soakaway gives some indication of the width of the wall, at about 1 m.

The houses have either one or two en-
Fig. 7. Norse houses on the Western Isles. Houses A, C and D are from Cille Pheadair. Houses B and E from Bornais and house F from Drimore. The houses are oriented roughly east–west or north–south with north at the top of the page.
trances, which are normally asymmetrically positioned so as to enter the middle of the north or eastern end depending on the orientation of the house. The exception is the early Cille Pheadair house (Fig. 7D) which has an entrance into the south end (though this was altered in a later modification to the structure). Two earlier houses also have entrances in their end walls but in the Cille Pheadair house this leads into an annex and this is also likely in the Bornais mound 1 house (not illustrated). This feature is also visible in the phase IX structure at the Udal (Crawford 1974, Fig 3). Entrance widths are fairly standard but lengths vary.

The internal features of these houses are relatively restricted, the principal feature being the hearth. These can vary considerably. The most carefully made are the two hearths in the latest buildings. The Bornais mound 3 structure has a sub-rectangular hearth completely enclosed by a kerb of small upright slabs (Fig. 7B). It dominates the northern part of the interior, lying directly in front of the entrance. A circular undefined patch of ash in the centre of the southern half of the interior may be a second hearth. The Cille Pheadair house (Fig. 7A) has a much larger hearth, only partially kerbed, which covers the central area of the house. The middle house at Cille Pheadair (Fig. 7C) has an extensive concentration of ash layers in the western half of the building but this was not kerbed. The hearths of the lower buildings have yet to be fully explored.

There is no evidence of raised platforms along the inside walls of the buildings and no evidence of timber partitions. Thin charcoal-rich floors are found in all of the houses and detailed analyses of the contents of these layers together with phosphate and magnetic susceptibility patterning give some indication of the activities that took place inside the house. However, it is already clear that animals were not regularly overwintered in these buildings. Access along narrow passages, often with threshold slabs and steps, and the location of the hearth directly in front of the doorway would have discouraged animals from entering these buildings.

The principal difference between the earlier and later structures appears to be one of size and shape. The later buildings are smaller and have 90° corners. The size is partly related to the presence of extensions to the end of the earlier houses. Buildings of a similar size to these extensions are found in the later period but these are separate structures with access directly into the open air. At Cille Pheadair a path leads from the entrance of the latest house to an associated outhouse (Fig. 6). The function of these outhouses is as yet unclear and there appears to be considerable modification and variety, which suggests that they were not restricted to any particular task. Whatever was happening, it seems clear that the outhouse was detached from the house during the 12th century.

THE DATE
Analysis of the economic and artefactual material is still in its infancy and it is not our intention to anticipate the results in this article. However, we take the opportunity to illustrate some of the more interesting finds and to discuss those that have chronological significance.

The most important finds for discussion of the chronology of the settlements are three coins: a very worn Canute penny of quatrefoil type ca. 1017–23 from the York mint of Ulfgrim; an unworn, but cut in half, silver, short-cross penny of King John (1199–1216) and a coin of Olaf Kyrre. The first two are from Cille Pheadair, the latter from Bornais. The King John coin came from above the floor of a secondary structure built into the last house at Cille Pheadair. This is the latest occupation layer and the coin therefore suggests the settlement was abandoned in the early 13th century. The Canute coin comes from layers lying on top of the early house (Fig. 7D) and indi-
cates that the abandonment of this house probably precedes the middle of the 11th century. The coin from Bornaiz is unfortunately from a disturbed area on mound 1 so it provides no detailed TAQ or TPQ. Nevertheless, it does suggest activity in the late 11th century on this mound.

The chronology of Bornaiz mound 2 is based on two combs and two pins (Fig. 8). The earliest comb (Fig. 8A) is similar to Ambrosiani’s B1 type (1981:63) which she would date to the 10th to 11th centuries. They are classed as short F2 by Dunlevy (1988:364–365) who would broaden the date range to incorporate the late 9th and 12th centuries. This comb was found with a bone pin (Fig. 8E) which can be compared to an example from the Library site at Trondheim, which is dated to the 11th century (Graham-Campbell 1980:59–60, n 210). These finds come from the final floor layer of the large house (Fig. 7E). Another comb (Fig. 8C) was found in the same trench but came from deposits immediately below the turf line after the house had been completely infilled. This comb has close parallels with combs from Jarlshof, Shetland (Hamilton 1956:179, Fig. 82) and Freswick, Caithness (Batey 1987) and is classified as class H by Dunlevy (1988:369) who dates this type to the 13th or 14th century. From roughly the same context as this comb came a bronze stick pin (Fig. 8G). This is a class 9 club-headed pin (O’Rahilly 1973:56–58) which is one of the most frequent classes at Dublin and Waterford (Scully 1997:439). They are dated from the late 11th century to the 13th century on both sites.

The most important find from Bornaiz mound 3 is a fine copper-alloy buckle (Fig. 8D) which came from the final fill layers above the floor of the house. In the London classification the buckle would be described as oval framed with ornate outside edge and plate (Egan and Pritchard 1991, 76). These buckles date from the late 12th to the late 14th century but the closest parallel to Bornaiz (Egan & Pritchard 1991: 313, Fig 46,) dates to the early 13th century. There is nothing from any of the Bornaiz mounds that would suggest they continued to be occupied after the 14th century and we suggest that abandonment could have been as early as the mid-13th century, which would be very similar to the date suggested by the Cille Pheadair coin.

DISCUSSION

The fieldwork on South Uist can contribute a considerable amount to the study of Norse colonization of the North Atlantic. It is now clear that large numbers of well-preserved settlements are identifiable on the Western Isles (contra Crawford 1974:7). The relative ease of identification indeed makes this region one of the few areas in Britain where it is possible to discuss Norse settlement patterns. The results of the geophysical survey undertaken at Bornaiz also suggest that non-invasive research might produce results of considerable significance. Buildings are identifiable and settlement plans may be recoverable on sites with a limited amount of overburden.

Large quantities of artefacts have been recovered along with substantial amounts of environmental material: large mammal bones, fish and carbonized plant remains. These are all in the process of being analysed and should, along with work on the soil chemistry of the settlement, provide considerable information about midden formation and activity within the buildings.

It is already clear from the survey evidence and the preliminary results of the excavation that our understanding of the Viking colonization of the islands and subsequent recolonization, by the Gaels of Scotland, can be enhanced by a critical understanding of the archaeological record. The impact of the Viking incursions on the native inhabitants in the Northern and Western Isles has been a subject of some controversy in the past two decades (fully summarized by Morris 1996). Iain Crawford
Fig. 8. A selection of artefacts from the recent excavations; all with the exception of B came from the excavations at Bornais. Comb A came from the floor levels of house E (Fig. 7) in mound 2, as did bone pin E. Comb C came from the final fill layers on top of this house, as did bronze pin G. Bronze buckle D came from a layer sealing house B in mound 3. Bronze pin F is an unstratified find from mound 1. Bone pin H came from midden layers in mound 2 and bone pin heads I and J came from the fill of a Norse house in mound 1. Comb B came from Cille Pheadair and lay in the primary levels of the room lying to the north of house D (Fig. 7).
has used the archaeological evidence from the Western Isles as conclusive proof that the event ‘took place in the 9th century and it was sudden and totally obliteratorive in terms of local material culture’ (Crawford 1981:267). His argument, whilst making reference to the place-name evidence, is largely based on the sequence at the Udal, North Uist and, as Morris (1996, 76) pertinently points out, the evidence from one site is never going to provide anything other than a simplistic picture of what must have been a very complex event.

Our view of this event has been greatly influenced by the evidence of the machair survey. There seems to be little evidence for any significant disruption to the settlement pattern when the Norse artefacts appear. The mounds that have Norse material are intimately associated with those producing evidence of Late Iron Age occupation. This settlement continuity is very difficult to understand if one believes that the indigenous population fled or was massacred. Particularly as the landscape occupied is very different from that of their homeland and the settlements have no easy access to the sea. Movement up and down the west coast of Scotland is likely to have been through the Minch to the east of South Uist, as this is considerably more sheltered than the Atlantic seaboard. Furthermore, it is the east coast of South Uist that has the sheltered anchorage, not the west coast where the settlements are found.

The machair has been described as ‘easily tillable, self-draining and quite fertile’ (Andersen 1991, 134) and the value of this landform can be supported by reference to the high rental values of the machair island of Sanday in Orkney (Hunter et al. 1994:273–274). However, the management of this landscape is not straightforward or simple (Owen et al. 1996:129–130). Soil fertility is inherently poor owing to the lack of essential nutrients and the soils are very thin and poorly developed. Fertility depends on manuring in order to add in the essential nutrients and this also thickens the soils and increases soil stability. Cataclysmic deflation is likely quickly to follow agricultural mismanagement and this can lead to the inundation of large areas of fields and settlements with metres of sand, within a matter of days. Animal pasturing, middening and rotation are crucial for sustainable agriculture. The symbolic importance of the midden is demonstrated by the creation of the very distinctive tell-like settlement mounds. These are created by the accumulation of large quantities of rubbish which could be used to stabilize the sand. This landscape is intensively settled largely because the rest of the island is so infertile. It only became fully exploited in the Early to Middle Iron Age and it is likely that it would require considerable specialist knowledge to exploit.

Understanding of the motivation behind the early Viking raids is important but difficult; were they primarily interested in booty or were they looking for land to settle and exploit? Andersen (1991:133) claims that ‘The original raiders fairly soon and perhaps in the course of a few decades more or less changed the sword for the plough or the spade and became farmers’. In contrast, Crawford (1987:126–127) highlights the absence of agricultural equipment in the graves in the Western Isles compared with those in the Northern Isles. She suggests that these graves indicate a Norse population of petty chiefs heavily involved in trading and raiding in Ireland. However, neither position really fits this evidence from the Western Isles. If we assume that raiding (and its provisioning) to the south was the main motivation, then the abandonment of the settlement would be understandable. But this would not explain the immediate reoccupation by incoming Norsemen who should be either sailing on or returning home. Crawford (1974:11) emphasizes that the Udal sequence demonstrates the building of a rectangular building on to a cellular building without any period of abandonment in between and the South Uist survey is clear evi-
dence for general continuity. Conversely, if the land seizure was the primary motivation, then it seems illogical to evict the inhabitants who have the knowledge necessary to productively exploit the landscape.

It has been argued that the presence of a new and distinctive architectural tradition of rectangular houses and the adoption of different traditions of material culture must indicate new populations, but this is a vast over-simplification. As Ritchie (1974) has pointed out, rectangular buildings are known from the Atlantic fringes of Scotland in the Late Iron Age and examples dating to the 3rd or 4th century AD are now known from Dun Vulan (Parker Pearson & Sharples forthcoming). Furthermore, Crawford (1974:12) initially argued that the bulk of the material culture changed very slightly. Only in later papers (i.e. Crawford 1981) has he chosen to stress the changes in material culture.

Interestingly, the features that are supposed to be so telling as signs of Norse colonization are not quite as diagnostic as one might first expect. The houses, though superficially Norse, are distinctively Hebridean in their subterranean construction and single-skinned form. This is a prevailing characteristic of machair settlement and represents an adaptation to the sand environment. The presence of a distinctive Norse ceramic tradition at a relatively early date is also important. The forms are different from the Late Iron Age forms but the decision to use ceramics is unusual. Other areas settled by the Vikings have no tradition of ceramic use and the forms created on the Western Isles seem only to be characteristic of this area. The Hebrides stands out in Scotland as the region with the most vigorous and inventive ceramic tradition and it is the continuity of this tradition that should be emphasized.

We have not yet investigated the earliest Viking Age levels of the late 8th–early 9th century and cannot confirm whether Crawford’s claim for a discontinuity at the Udal on North Uist is present at Bornais. However, Crawford fails to consider why the population, indigenous or alien, should choose to construct a new building and abandon old buildings. This cannot simply be related to the stability of the existing building. Any examination of the anthropological literature suggests that a whole series of social factors are likely to dictate how a building is created, used and abandoned (Sveinbjarnardottir 1992).

We suggest that the inhabitants of these communities continued an ancient tradition of building but according to new rules of style because they decided that it would benefit them to do so. The attractions of becoming a Viking may have been considerable. This is not to argue that the Viking invasion was a peaceful event. Power was usurped by an incoming population and this is likely to have led to the death of many people. But it seems logical to assume that the bulk of the indigenous population survived the coming of the Vikings and adapted their way of life to the new social and political regime. As Armit has suggested (1996:203), the main disruption may have been in the upper levels of the hierarchy with a Scandinavian overlordship eradicating the Pictish aristocracy. This might also help to explain the puzzling absence of Norse settlement on the broch sites of the Western Isles.

The other striking feature of the survey was the abandonment of the machair as the location for settlement before or during the 14th century. However, we do not intend to suggest that this disruption is the result of a recolonization of the islands by Gaels from southwest Scotland, although this has sometimes been suggested by place-name scholars to explain the striking absence of Norse influence on spoken and written Gaelic in the islands (summarized in Barnes 1983:77–78). The basic territorial organization of the island continues across the period with townships on the blacklands having adjacent Norse precursors on the machair. Massive disruption of settlement patterns
seems to be a general feature of the Medieval settlement of many areas, though not at the same time. Iceland has enormous numbers of abandoned farmsteads (Sveinbjarnardottir 1992) and both Vinland and Greenland are abandoned.

A wide range of explanations for large-scale abandonment can be found in the archaeological literature. The most common ones include disease, soil exhaustion and climatic instability. In the Hebrides it is unlikely that soil exhaustion is a relevant criterion. We have already argued that the machair is permanently exhausted and always required manuring and rotation. Disease might be a factor, as might climatic deterioration. The fortuitous combination of wind, rain or drought could create conditions that would destabilize the machair and in this situation evacuation to the adjacent solid ground to the east would be advisable. However it is also possible that social or political reasons could lead to a movement away from the machair without the necessity of an invasion.

The incorporation of the Outer Hebrides into the Gaelic polity known as the Lordship of the Isles may have created social and economic changes of considerable significance. One could, for instance, envisage increasing specialization within the islands as a result of closer exchange relations. Cattle production in South Uist might involve closer control of the grazing land of the western half of the island and a reduced emphasis on the arable land of the machair. Only further excavation of the Late or post-Medieval settlement in the blacklands will make these speculations credible interpretations.

This settlement disruption might go some way towards explaining why the Uists have a much more limited number of Norse place-names. Whatever the cause of the disruption it would have increased the likelihood that settlement names would be lost or replaced by Gaelic names. The pattern cannot be used to suggest that these islands were any more or less Norse than the islands of Lewis and Harris.

The aim of this article is to present some of the information that has been collected by recent archaeological work in the Western Isles. This region has been unjustly neglected in Norse studies and it is our hope that this work will encourage other colleagues to visit and study the material from the area. The material has a lot to contribute to our understanding of the nature of Viking colonization of the Atlantic fringe, and to the Medieval settlement of Scotland.

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NOTES


2 Analysis of the assemblages from Bornais and Lille Pheadair suggests than Lane may have underestimated the date range of these ceramics and that they are in use through to the 12th and possibly 13th centuries AD.

3 Further excavation in 1998 indicates this coin gave a misleading date. Glazed pottery from the underlying floor can be dated no earlier than the 12th century AD.

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