

Aerial view of Eigg. (SC771467)

**INTRODUCTION**

Eigg is the second largest of the Small Isles, a group of islands lying across the sea routes along the west coast of Scotland and across the Minch to the Western Isles. Dominated by the towering peak of An Sgurr, its distinctive outline is an instantly recognisable landmark from land and sea. The island is composed largely of basaltic lavas, which readily break down to provide a fertile soil, and this has attracted settlers from at least the Neolithic period. Generations thereafter have left their mark, from Bronze Age hut-circles and Iron Age forts to a cemetery of Pictish square cairns, a series of early Christian crosses and, finally, the townships cleared during the 19th century. By then the population had reached over 500 souls. Having changed hands several times over the last two centuries, the island was finally purchased in 1997 by the residents, in partnership with the Scottish Wildlife Trust and the Highland Council. With a community of over seventy residents, Eigg remains the most populous of the Small Isles.

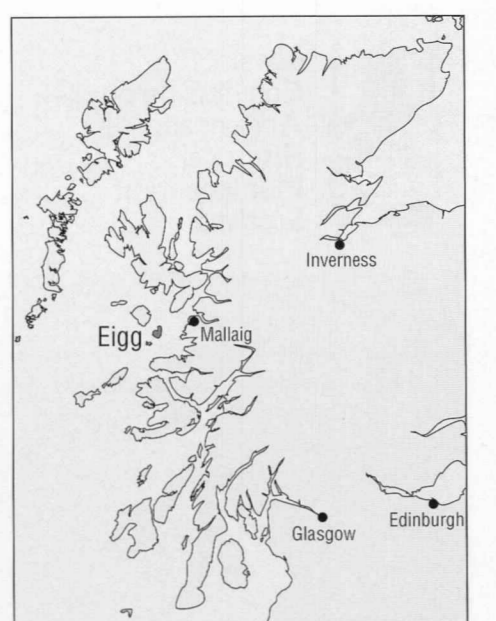
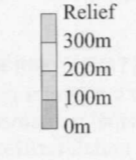
The prime areas for settlement have always been in the low-lying areas, principally around Galmisdale and Kildonnan in the south-east of the island and around Cleadale and Laig in the north-west. These areas, which are still inhabited today, contain several prehistoric monuments, including burial cairns and hut-circles, but are more remarkable for the extensive landscapes of 18th- and 19th-century fields and lazy-bed cultivation around the old townships. The most dense concentrations of archaeological remains, however, are to be found on the narrow strips of rough pasture below the cliffs on the east coast, and between An Sgurr and the south coast. Both these areas have been largely uninhabited since the mid 19th century, and have lain relatively undisturbed for the last 150 years. The east coast is rough and raw, yet amongst the boulders and screes there are the remains of hundreds of shieling-huts, stock pens, enclosures and rock shelters, some of which may be several thousand years old. Within this wild landscape there are two more fertile oases, at Talm and at Struidh, both of which were occupied by small farms in the early 19th century. Struidh is overlain by a prehistoric fort on the summit of Corragan Mór. The south coast below An Sgurr is more attractive land, and forts and hut-circles stand within an extensive system of later fields surrounding the townships of Grulin Uachdrach and Grulin lochdrach (Upper and Lower Grulin). The north-eastern and western uplands of the island are much less hospitable, though even here small groups of shieling-huts of medieval or later date can be found, some of which have been built over the remains of prehistoric hut-circles.

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- Bronze Age metal working site
- Building, shieling-hut or rock shelter
- Burial cairn
- Church and site of monastery
- Cultivation remains (transcribed from aerial photography)
- Enclosure or pre-crofting boundary
- Fort or dun
- Hut-circle
- Kelp kiln
- Neolithic house (possible)
- Ritual enclosure
- Square cairn cemetery
- Building (modern)
- Church
- Cliff
- Forestry and woodland
- Road or track
- Water feature



The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) records and interprets the sites, monuments and buildings of Scotland's past, and promotes a greater appreciation of their value through the maintenance of the National Monuments Record of Scotland (NMRS).

RCAHMS has recently been engaged in a programme of surveying and recording the archaeological sites and monuments on the Small Isles. The work on Eigg was supported by the Scottish Wildlife Trust, from a grant made available by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The survey was assisted by the enthusiastic co-operation of the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust and the residents of the island.

The NMRS is open to the public (09.30-16.30 Monday to Friday) at the address below. CANMORE, the NMRS database, can be consulted on the RCAHMS website ([www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk)).

Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland  
John Sinclair House  
16 Bernard Terrace  
Edinburgh  
EH8 9NX

Tel: 0131-662 1456  
Web Site: [www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk)

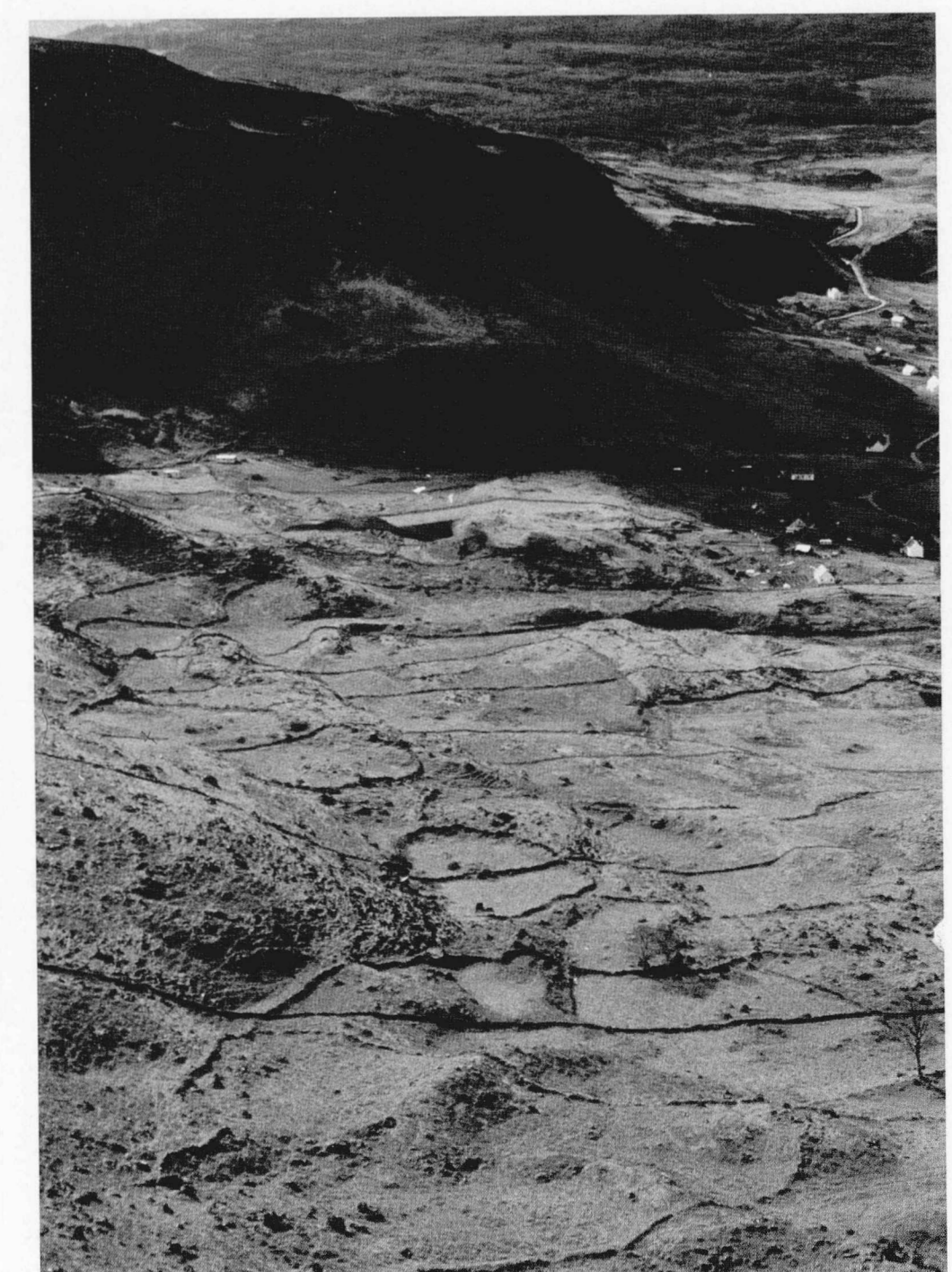


**ISLE OF EIGG HERITAGE TRUST**

The Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust is a unique partnership between the Eigg residents, Scottish Wildlife Trust and The Highland Council, with a vision to establish a viable community for people of all ages, through building on aspects of our natural and cultural heritage.  
Web Site: [www.isleofeigg.org](http://www.isleofeigg.org)

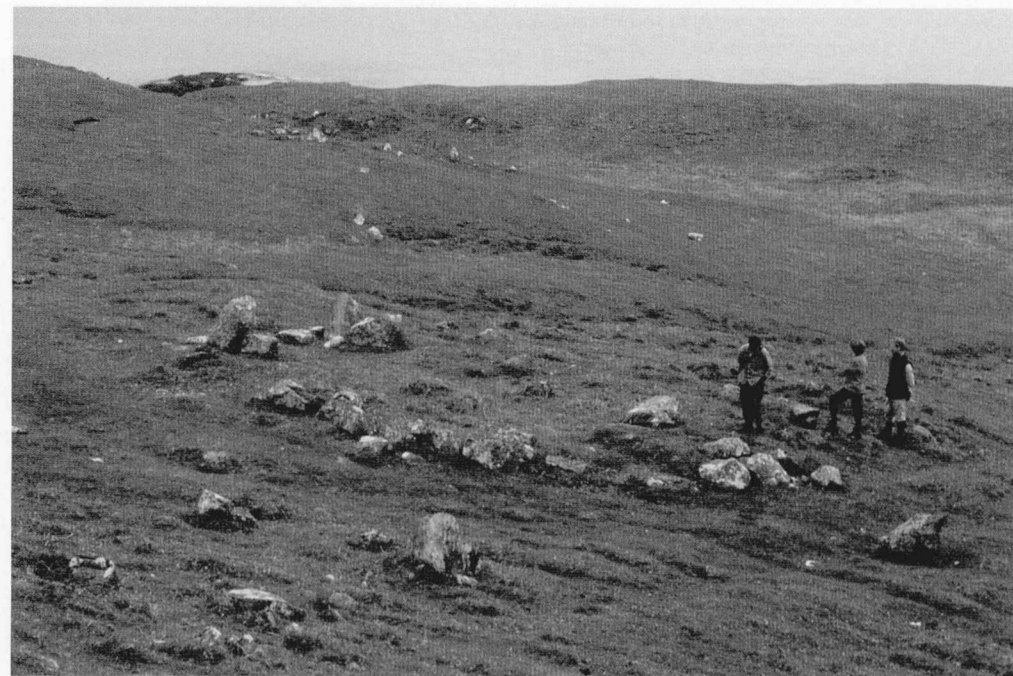
**Acknowledgement**  
The drawing of the bronze-casting process at Galmisdale and the photographs of artefacts discovered on Eigg are reproduced courtesy of the National Museums of Scotland (NMS) © The Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland 2003. The Viking sword hilt and boat stem are on display in the Museum of Scotland, at the address below, which is open Monday to Saturday 10.00 - 17.00, Tuesday 10.00 - 20.00 and Sunday 12.00 - 17.00.

**National Museums of Scotland**  
Chambers Street  
Edinburgh EH1 1JF  
Tel: 0131-225 7534  
Web Site: [www.nms.ac.uk](http://www.nms.ac.uk)



Irregularly-shaped fields of the township of Cleadale, overlain by the straight boundaries of the later crofting township. (SC771503)





Possible Neolithic house at Galmisdale. (SC722842)

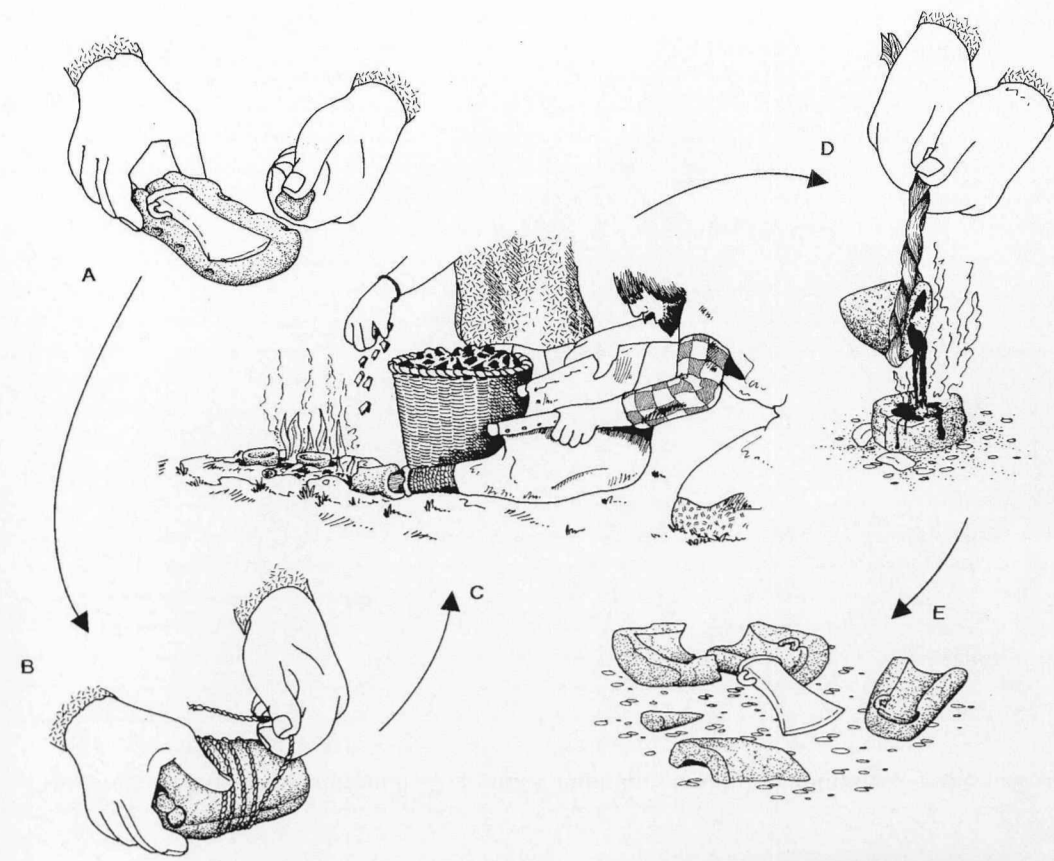
**EARLY PREHISTORY (7500-800 BC)**

It is likely that Eigg was frequented by groups of hunter-fishers during the Mesolithic period (7500-4000 BC), perhaps using some of the rock shelters hidden amongst the boulder screes on the east coast. There is clearer evidence for occupation in the Neolithic period (4000-2500 BC), which saw the introduction of agriculture and new types of stone tools. Neolithic polished stone axes and leaf-shaped flint arrowheads have been picked up in fields on Eigg, and at Galmisdale there are the footings of an oval building that may be a Neolithic house, comparable to those recorded on Shetland. Similar buildings may await discovery on other Hebridean islands, but at present this is the sole representative on the west coast of an architectural tradition more usually found 450 kilometres to the north.

No certain examples of Neolithic burials have been discovered on the island, but there are about fifteen circular burial cairns, most of them probably of Early Bronze Age date (2500-1400 BC). The ruin of what is either a central cist or a small chamber can be seen in one at Kildonnan. Some of the thirty hut-circles may also date from the Bronze Age.

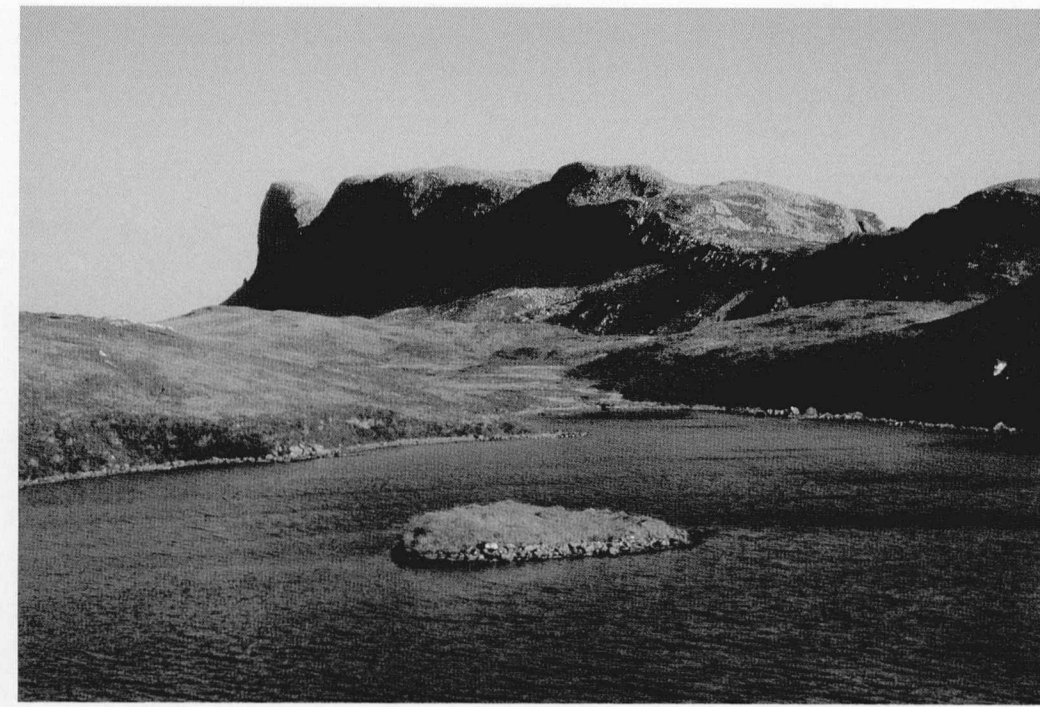


Leaf-shaped flint arrowhead found near Kildonnan (Copyright NMS).

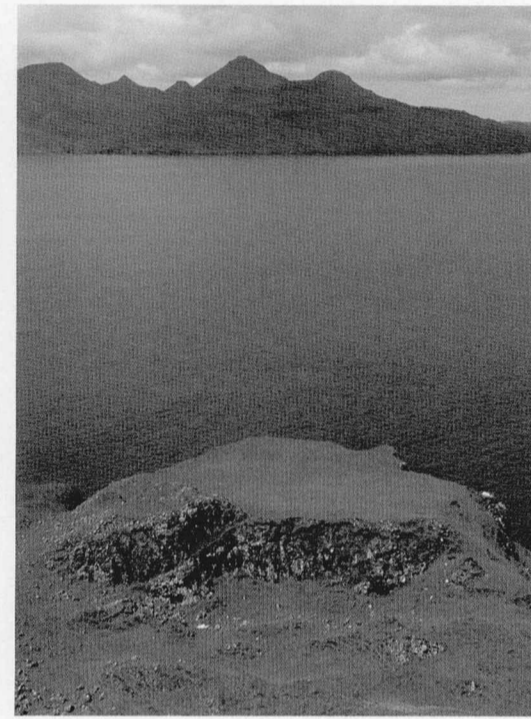


The bronze socketed axehead from Eigg, and an artist's reconstruction showing some of the main stages in its manufacture: A. preparing the clay mould; B. sealing the mould; C. melting the bronze alloy in small crucibles; D. pouring the metal into the mould; E. opening the mould to free the casting. Drawn by A Braby (Copyright NMS).

Until recently the only Bronze Age metalwork known from Eigg was a bronze socketed axehead in the collection of the National Museums of Scotland, discovered somewhere on the island during the 19th century. In the spring of 2001, however, the late Brigg Lancaster made a remarkable chance discovery near his home at Galmisdale, unearthing fragments of clay moulds and crucibles from within what was found to be a rough setting of boulders. The moulds had been used for casting bronze socketed axes and knives, and date from the Late Bronze Age (1000-800 BC). Subsequent excavations by a team from the National Museums of Scotland revealed that this debris was the result of a short-lived episode of metalworking, perhaps lasting no more than a day or two. Despite the hundreds of bronze artefacts held in museum collections, such manufacturing sites are surprisingly rare, making this discovery on Eigg one of national significance.



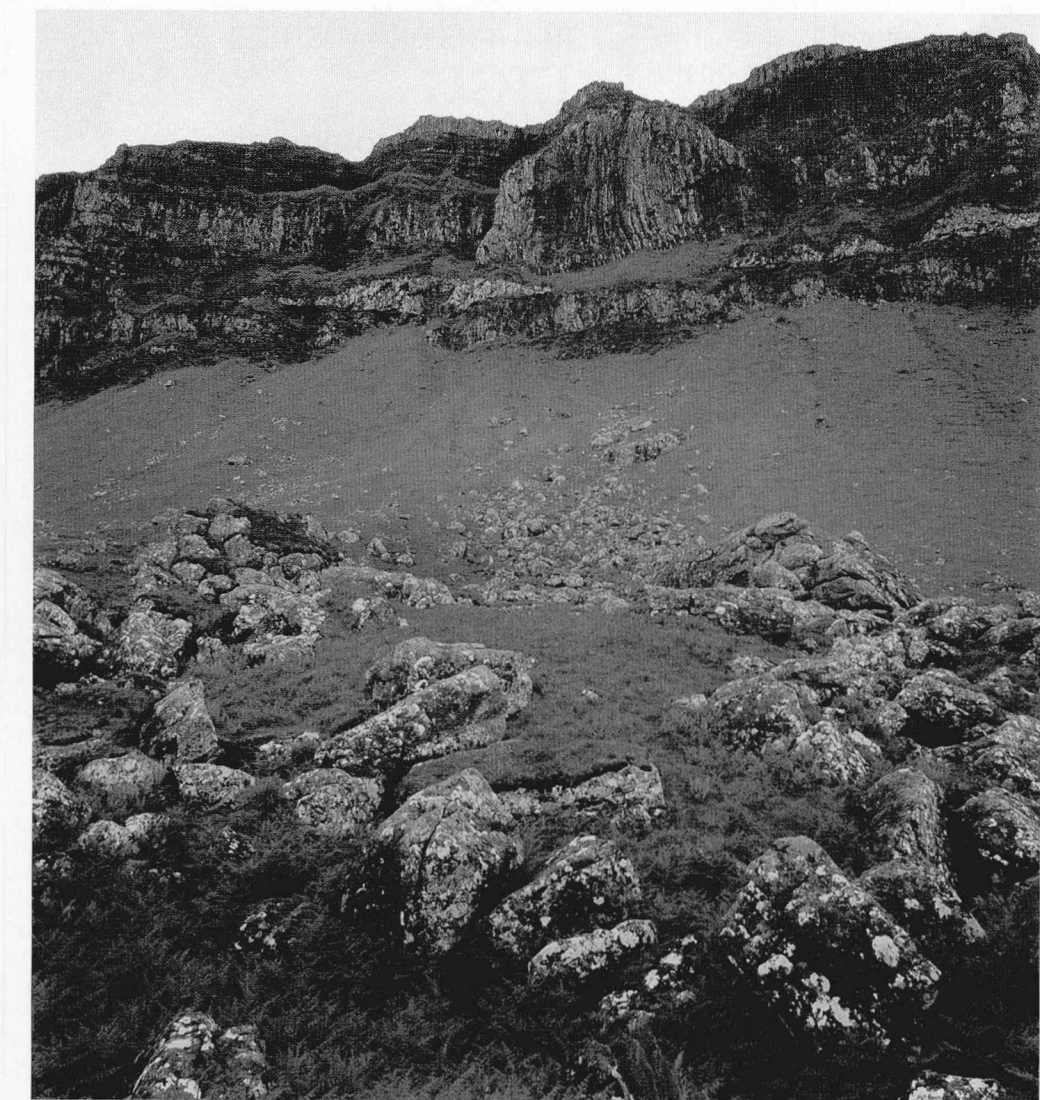
The island dun on Loch nam Ban Mora, with An Sgurr beyond. (SC729720)



Fort at Poll Duhaill, near Laig. (SC686860)

**LATER PREHISTORY (800 BC-AD 500)**

While some of the hut-circles may date from the Iron Age, the principal monuments of this period are forts and duns (small fortified homesteads). Eight are now known on Eigg, most of them occupying rocky stacks or promontories around the coast, though one dun stands on an islet in Loch nam Ban Mora. Each fort is defended by a stone wall. The largest commands the island from the summit of An Sgurr, the wall barring the approach from the west still standing some 1.8m high. The bleak rock sheets making up most of the interior, however, hardly lend themselves to any form of permanent occupation, and forts such as this may hold more significance for their spectacular locations than for any defensive purpose.



The possible prehistoric ritual enclosure at Struidh stands on the platform in the centre of this photograph. (SC729717)

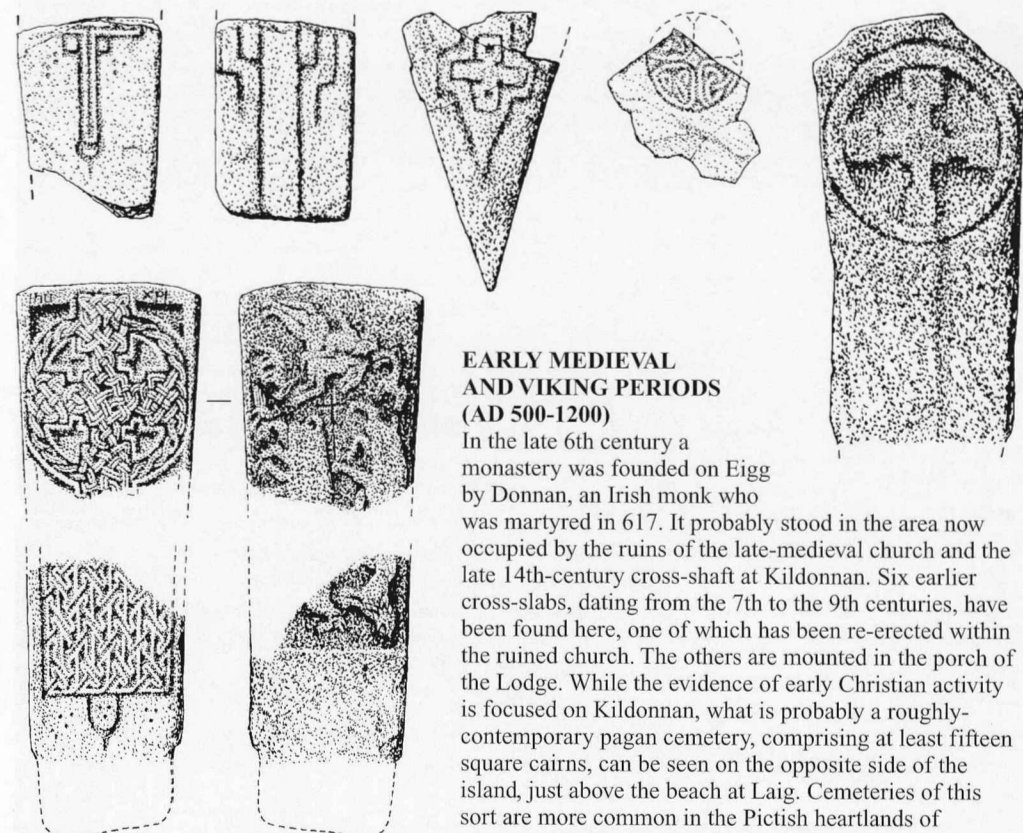
The natural characteristics of another location also appear to have been important in this period. Hidden amidst a jumble of gigantic boulders beneath the cliffs at Struidh, on the remote north-east coast of the island, there stand the remains of one of the most intriguing sites on Eigg. Here a thick-walled enclosure surrounds the entrance to a large boulder cave. The cave entrance and the sides of the chamber have been modified by the insertion of rough walling, and a thick deposit of midden material covers the floor. It is difficult to argue the case for a defensive or domestic function for this site. It occupies a secluded spot, over 400m of difficult terrain separating it from the shore, and reaching it involves a tricky scramble. Its most striking feature, though, is its setting in relation to the cliffs above, where horizontal banding of different lavas is broken by a dramatic eruption of vertical basalt columns. Standing in front of the enclosure, the eye is immediately drawn upwards, and the view is framed by two enormous boulders, one to each side. The sense that this has been a 'special place' is inescapable, and it may be that this is a site of religious significance.



The ruins of the medieval parish church and the cross shaft at Kildonnan. (SC729701)



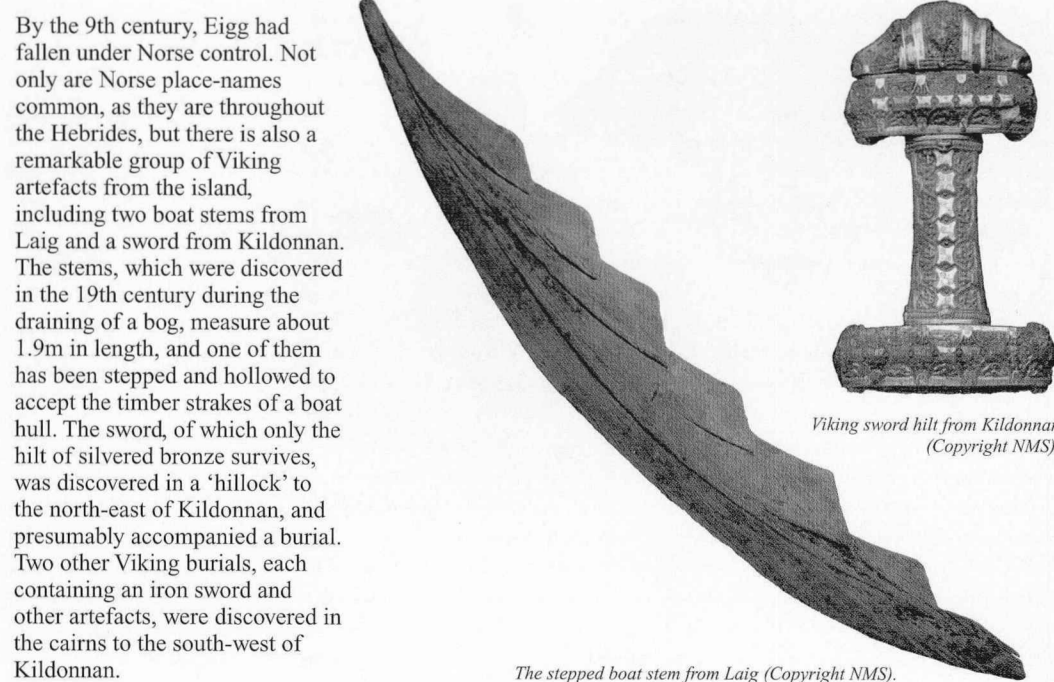
Square cairn cemetery, Laig. (SC686861)



Early-medieval cross-slabs from Kildonnan.

**EARLY MEDIEVAL AND VIKING PERIODS (AD 500-1200)**

In the late 6th century a monastery was founded on Eigg by Donnan, an Irish monk who was martyred in 617. It probably stood in the area now occupied by the ruins of the late-medieval church and the late 14th-century cross-shaft at Kildonnan. Six earlier cross-slabs, dating from the 7th to the 9th centuries, have been found here, one of which has been re-erected within the ruined church. The others are mounted in the porch of the Lodge. While the evidence of early Christian activity is focused on Kildonnan, what is probably a roughly-contemporary pagan cemetery, comprising at least fifteen square cairns, can be seen on the opposite side of the island, just above the beach at Laig. Cemeteries of this sort are more common in the Pictish heartlands of northern and eastern Scotland; few, however, are as impressive as this one, and its presence here serves as a reminder that Eigg lay on the frontier between the Picts to the north and east and the Scots of Dalriada to the south.



The stepped boat stem from Laig (Copyright NMS).

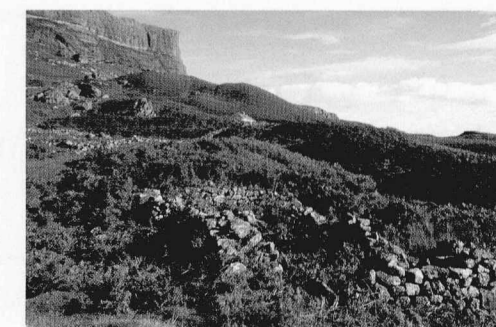
Viking sword hilt from Kildonnan (Copyright NMS).



Part of the township of Grulin Uachdrach.

**LATER SETTLEMENT (AD 1200-1900)**

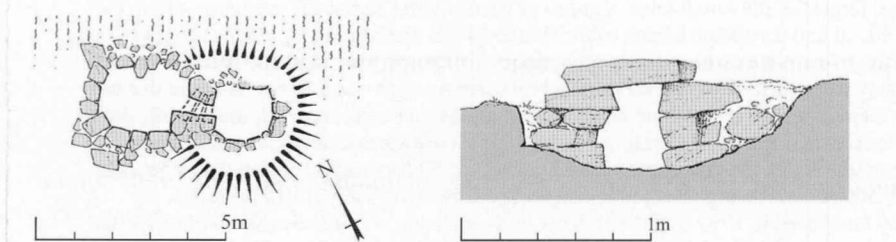
Eigg was held by the MacDonalds of Clanranald for most of the medieval period. During this time the island was divided into about a dozen townships, the leases of which were held jointly by groups of tenants who worked the surrounding land. The ruins of many of these can still be seen, though the visible remains are unlikely to be earlier than about 1700. At Five Pennies and Braigh the houses and outbuildings are constructed with turf walls, faced inside and out with large stones, but at Grulin they are mainly stone-built and are probably of early 19th-century date. The irregular field-systems that surround these townships are particularly well-preserved at Five Pennies and at Grulin.



Stone-walled building at Grulin Uachdrach. (SC771498)



Turf-cored building at Five Pennies. (SC771504)



Plan of a shieling-hut north-west of An Cruachan, with a cross-section of the passage connecting the two chambers.

**Shielings**

Until the break up of the joint townships in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the grazing of high pastures during the summer months was an important part of the farming year. Known as 'shielings', these areas are usually betrayed by clusters of small huts. Most of them are simple rectangular turf bothies, often reduced to little more than low grassy mounds, but some have two or more cells or chambers, linked by narrow lintelled passages. The rear chamber is invariably constructed of stone within a turf embankment, and was probably intended to keep the interior cool for the storage of butter and cheese, the traditional products of the shieling.

**Kelp, crofting and clearances**

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries the pattern of townships and shielings was broken up across the Highlands and Islands as huge areas of ground were leased to sheep farmers. On the west coast, chiefs and landlords looked to the displaced population to manufacture kelp, a soda ash produced by burning seaweed in simple kilns, which was important as a bleaching agent and in the manufacture of soap, glass and gunpowder for a short period from about 1790 to 1815. A new form of settlement, the crofting township, emerged as the mass of the population were given small-holdings to supplement their income from kelp production. Eigg was no exception; Cleadale was divided into narrow strips in 1809, and remains a crofting township to this day, its straight boundary walls traceable from the cliffs to the sea. The remains of the kelp kilns (narrow trenches flanked by a pair of low stone walls) are more difficult to find, although a few examples have been identified around the coast of the island.