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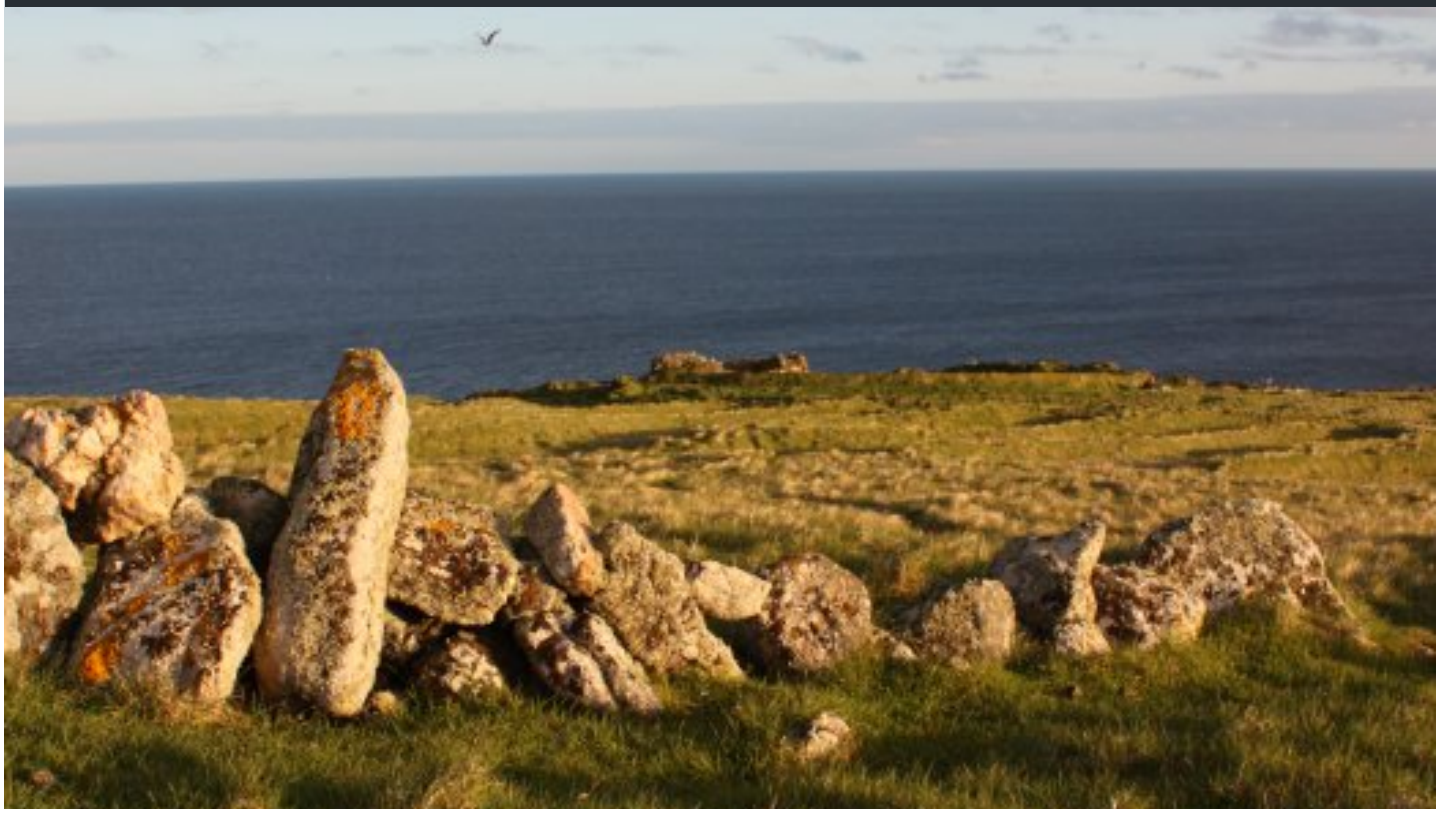
North Rona village and chapel - Western Isles

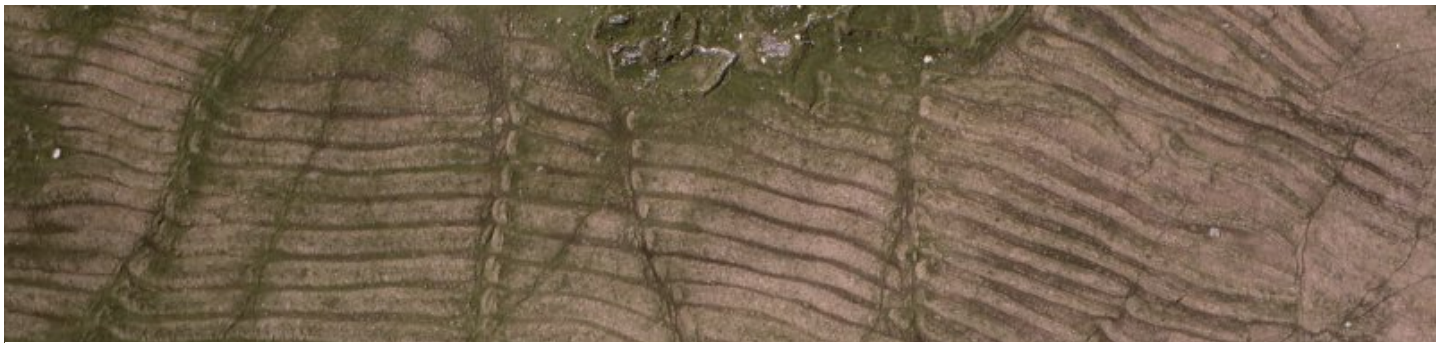


Rona of the Ocean

Sometime around 1680, the tacksman of St Kilda, his wife and a ‘good crew’ set sail back to the Outer Hebrides, carrying with them much of the St Kildan’s rent for that year as produce. A great storm blew up and the small boat was forced to turn before the wind. Past Harris and Lewis she flew, sea foaming along the gunnels, men straining sinew to hold her course before the ever strengthening waves. At last they were cast ashore on the island of Rona, an outpost even more distant than St Kilda itself, 130 miles to the northwest, and 45 miles from the nearest shore. True to the poetry of Gaelic, the island’s local name, Ronaidh an t’haf, means Rona of the Ocean.

The party of Macleods must have called out for help as they staggered up the steep slopes towards the huddle of five houses, but no reply came. They found a young woman dead in the first house, with a child at her breast. Each of the 30 or so people on the island had succumbed to starvation or disease, and the exhausted mariners were left to fend for themselves. For the months of winter the Macleods tarried, surviving on the produce of St Kilda (grain, cheese and tallow) and the peat stored for fuel, and patiently waiting for a spell of calm weather. Lucky enough to have a carpenter among them, and wood to salvage from the islanders houses, they eventually sailed into Stornoway to a feast and celebration that lasted ‘for some days’ (Robson 2001, 30). Rona was resettled after this disaster, but the population dwindled from five families to one shepherd and his flock, before it was abandoned as a permanent settlement around 1840.

It is a world apart, a fertile, green and uninhabited island amid a turbulent and ever-changing sea. On most days, the lookout offers nothing but ocean and the gannet rocks of Sula Sgeir to the west. But on a warm summer’s day, the hills of Lewis appear, and those of Sutherland and Orkney. For the archaeologist it offers an unparalleled opportunity to study the development of a unique Hebridean landscape. The settlement and houses, and the fields of hand-dug ‘lazy beds’ (feannagan), speak to a gradual decline from the 17th to the 19th centuries, but are rare in their good preservation, and the richness of the folklore and tradition that survives among the communities of Ness on Lewis. Outside the settlement, the landscape is dotted with peat stands (used to dry the islanders fuel), and old dykes which separated out areas of grazing, all mapped by RCAHMS and Jill Harden in 2010.



The Chapel

It is the chapel that has attracted most attention from antiquaries and visitors, with archaeological records made since the 1850s. Set in an oval burial ground marked out by a ancient turf and stone dyke, the small building has laid claim to being one of Scotland's earliest ecclesiastical buildings (Miers 2008), since its closest architectural parallels were thought to lie in the early medieval stone chapels of southwest Ireland. Roofless and ruined, the main room of the chapel is accessed through a low doorway and measures only 4.3m by 2.7m. Excavations were undertaken here in the 1930s by the famous naturalist Frank Fraser Darling and now the chapel acts as an informal store for carved stone fragments that range from early medieval grave markers to post-medieval rotary querns. A tiny door (accessible only by crawling) leads from the chapel into a chancel or oratory described by the Commission's architect G P H Watson in 1924 as 'manifestly much older than the western division'. The walls of the chancel converge as they rise in a type of building known as corbelling. Though certainly repaired over the years, and far from safe in its present state, it is a unique structure.

This tiny yet complex building still invites argument, discussion, research and debate. A close analysis of the building by Mark Thacker in 2012 led to a challenge to the notion that the chancel is Early Medieval at all, and an alternate explanation was put forward that the whole structure represented a Norse bi-cameral church of 12th century date. Thacker put further emphasis on the use of lime mortar in the building, arguing that plaster finishes in this building, lying at is did at the edge of the Christian world, may have symbolic as well as functional importance.

But Rona's interest goes well-beyond the building archaeology of this fascinating chapel. Excavations on the island by archaeologist Jill Harden, the first to modern standards, set out to understand whether settlement on the island pre-dated the evidence provided by the Early Medieval sculpture for a Christian foothold. A radiocarbon date of c.600 AD from a carbonised cereal grain recovered from underneath the graveyard enclosure seemed to suggest clearly that the island was occupied and farmed long before (Harden pers. comm.), and causes us to think again about the possibility that the medieval remains overlie a settlement mound that is more ancient.

Rona remains an incredibly difficult place to get to with no regular transport links, no facilities other than a small researcher's bothy, no power or water, and sometimes fierce weather – but it presents an unparalleled opportunity for adventure. The experience of working and living there is both rewarding and evocative, always with the sound of the sea and far from anywhere else. But a 12 hour close-reefed sail back to Stornoway, in an ocean-going yacht beyond Macleod's imagination, is certainly not something I would like to repeat. Little known, it is certainly a jewel in the crown of the medieval archaeology of northwest Scotland, and one where many of the questions remained unanswered. As I write, I can recall the island as its summer growth pushes through, nesting birds wheel and dive across the azure sky, and the small flock of sheep move over its ancient and provocative forms. As the poet Kathleen Jamie said, writing about Rona from personal experience, 'we can imagine a past as sweet, as though bathed in a bronze light'.

Sources:

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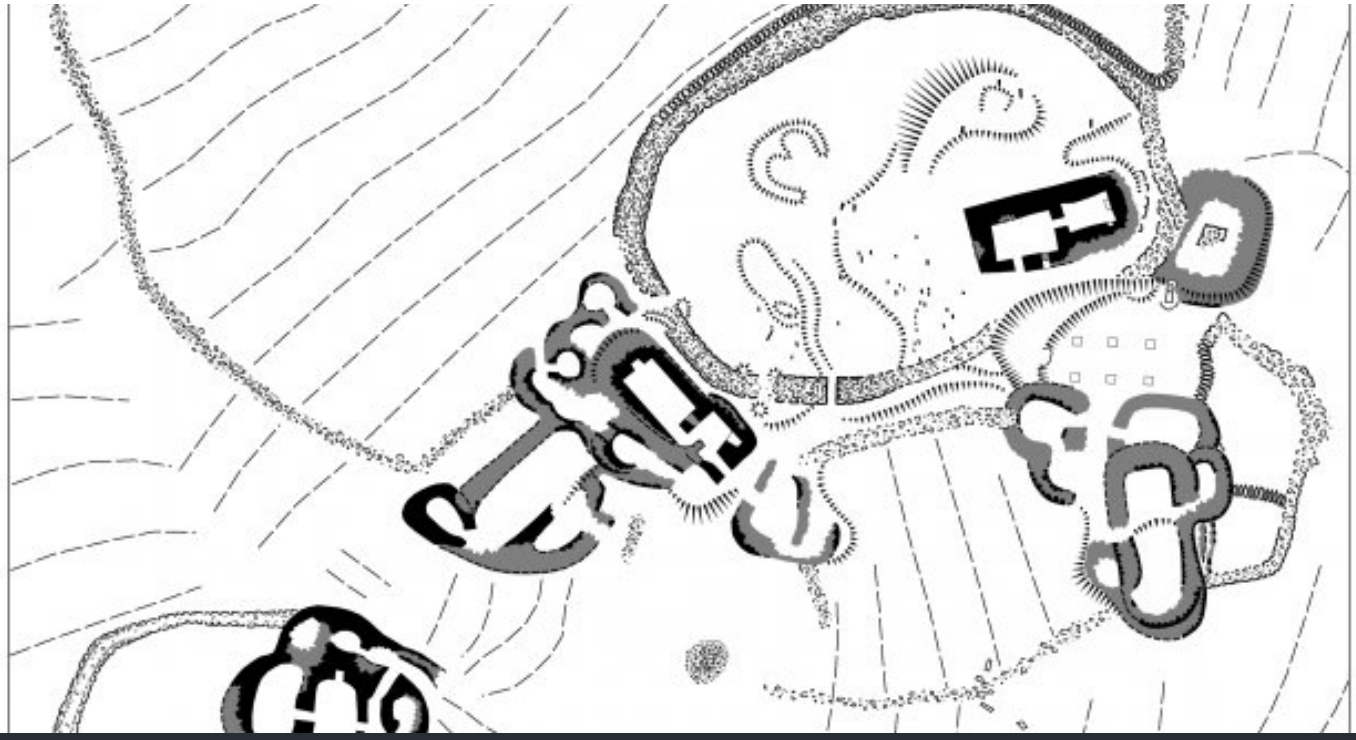

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