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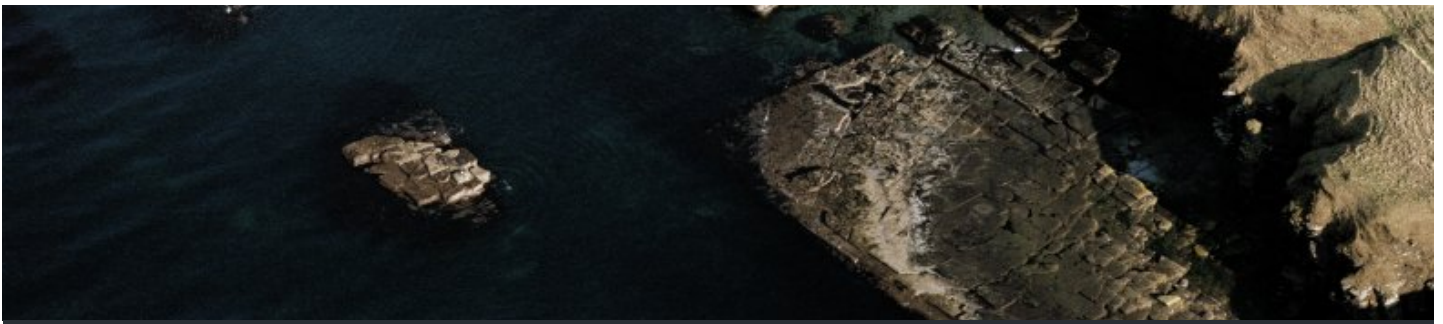


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Castle Sinclair Girnigoe – Caithness, Highland





A Tale of Two Castles?

Despite the reference to two Castles at the site in much of the 19th and 20th literature, this is in fact one castle site, albeit one with a complex history [Canmore reflects this historic inaccuracy]. Attempts by the family to have it renamed Castle Sinclair in the early 17th century led to a tendency from at least 1701 to call the later elements of the castle Sinclair while the earlier elements retained the earlier name Girnigoe. The modern name of the site combines these elements, reflecting the coherence of the site as a single complex.

Approaching the castle from the land, the visitor first crosses a dry ditch that exploits a natural gully to create a formidable barrier. A large western gatehouse protected the principal entrance, giving way to an outer bailey with ranges along its SW, NW and SE sides. To the NE a second dry ditch impeded access to the remainder of the site, dominated by a tower house. Beyond this a narrow inner bailey was lined with structures on its NW and SE sides including, at the NE end, some of the earliest buildings on the site. Much of the site is conceived with defence in mind – the two ditches and their original drawbridges, a portcullis, gun loops and thick curtain walls making it effectively impregnable. That said, there are at least three subsidiary entrances that may have been used to victual the castle from the sea. As with other medieval castles the upper floors of the tower, gatehouse and bailey ranges provided accommodation for the Earl and his guests.

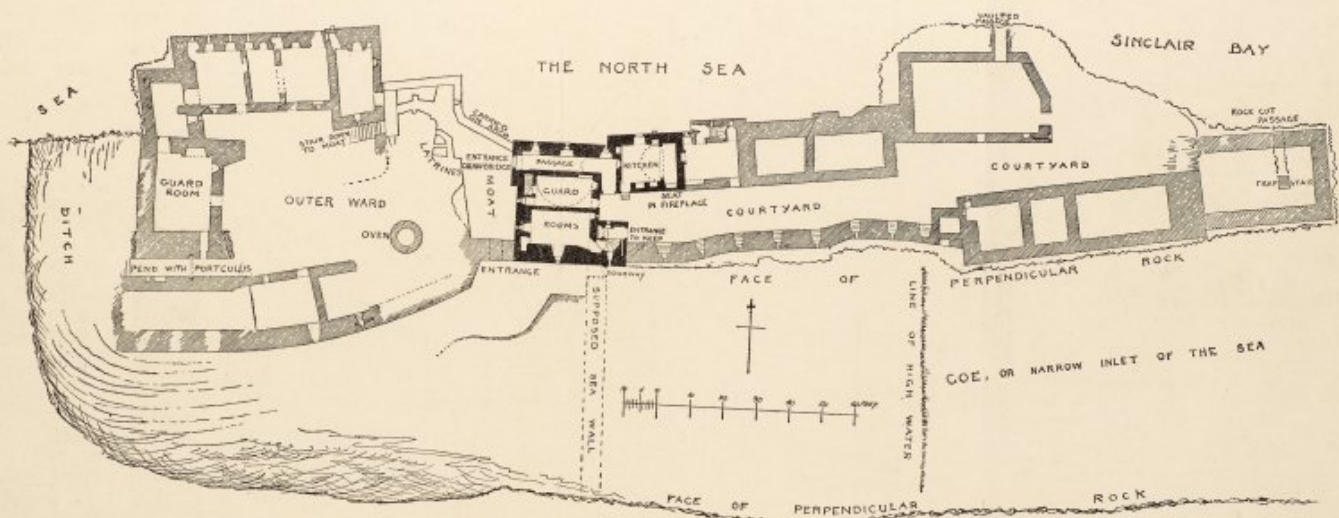


FIG. 33.—Girnigoe Castle (No. 487).

Castle History

The most recent analysis of the castle suggests that it has its origins in the 14th century, although it is perfectly possible that it re-uses an earlier site. In the late 14th or early 15th century the building currently known as the west gatehouse (often called Castle Sinclair) was erected. By the end of the 15th century the curtain wall had been built incorporating gun loops intended for the armament of the period, while a structure had been established on the site of the central tower house. In the late 16th and early 17th centuries the central tower house (known as Castle Girnigoe) was erected in its current form and the western gatehouse was embellished and enlarged – this work coincides with the renaming of the castle and with the date inscribed on a stone recorded in 1720. In the 1650s the castle was occupied by Cromwellian troops, and subsequently repaired, but it was badly damaged by an attack in 1680. By 1700 the building was effectively a ruin, and formed an important node in the development of a Romantic vision of Scotland's past.

Despite the worst efforts of the unforgiving Caithness weather and stone robbing, the remains of this stronghold of the Earls of Caithness survive in a state where the visitor can still appreciate the architecture, power and status of the Earls of Caithness. Of all the castles in Scotland this unusually named castle demonstrates the skill of the architects and builders in adapting their construction to the constraints of the landscape whilst also making a statement about the power and status of its owners.

Recently the Clan Sinclair Trust have undertaken repairs and archaeological excavation as well as improving access. Despite this great care must at all times be taken when visiting this castle.

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<http://www.caithness.org/caithness/castles/sinclairgirnigoe/>
<https://canmore.org.uk/site/9144/castle-girnigoe>
<https://canmore.org.uk/site/9180/castle-sinclair>



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