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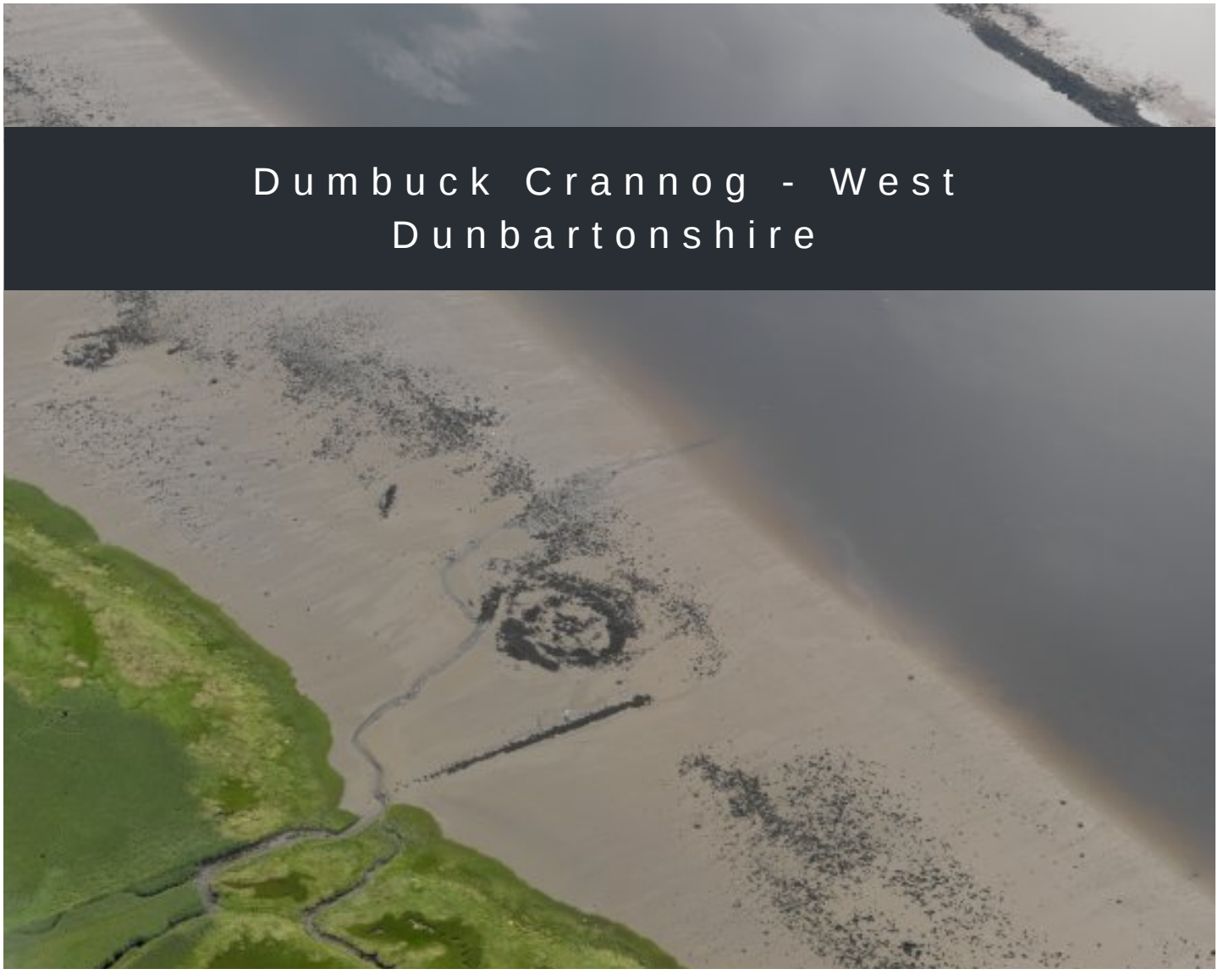

Discovery and context / An island idylls or evidence of hard work?

On Sunday 31st July 1898 William Donnelly was walking along the banks of the Clyde, just to the east of Dumbarton Rock, when he found the remains of what turned out to be a circular timber platform, preserved in the intertidal mud. Donnelly had discovered the first of four marine crannogs surviving in the inner Firth of Clyde. Crannogs are found across Scotland and Ireland, mainly in freshwater lochs, but there are nine known around Scotland's coastline, found in estuarine conditions. The preservation on crannogs can be amazing because they are situated in water and are generally covered by mud!

Crannogs today evoke something of a romantic notion of living in the past. Historically, this involved stories that create an image of islands surrounded by mist, in blissful isolation. However, excavation and analysis has provided evidence that crannogs were the fruits of hard labour, which was required to build these complex timber structures. We also know that many of them were occupied at similar times as the settlements on land, and formed part of interconnected communities. As a result of years of excavations on crannogs we are able to reconstruct their form and some of their functions. For example, archaeologists have recovered collapsed timber walls, found floor levels superimposed one on top of the other and excavated textiles and animal skins, which could have been used for clothing. Clearly both structural remains and individual finds from crannogs can tell us a lot about past lives.

Scotland’s own whodunnit and a modern re-evaluation

Dumbuck is a crannog with two stories: the archaeology of an Iron Age site and the story of a Victorian excavation and controversy. A recent book charts the history of the Victorian excavation, and uses archive material held by HES and accessible through Canmore to reconstruct a diary of events (Hale and Sands 2005). Excavations by William Donnelly and the Helensburgh Naturalist and Antiquarian Society over the summers of 1898 and 1899 discovered the overall plan of the site, along with a 12m long log boat in a wooden dock and a wide range of small finds. Donnelly and his team were able to excavate the timber platform, which comprised oak upright posts encircling horizontally laid alder timbers. These timbers were specifically chosen as they are resistant to rotting in wet conditions. The platform was surrounded by a stone and timber breakwater, which may have been a later construction, as a result of the water-levels changing. Excavations at other marine crannogs have established that these sites were built at the very edge of the tide mark and were positioned specifically for access to and from the tidal waterways.

During the excavations a number of small finds began to attract the attention of not only the archaeological community, but also the wider press. A series of unusual figurines and stone objects with carvings on them were being recovered. The objects became known as ‘the queer things of the Clyde’. Donnelly believed the objects to be original to the crannog and part of the culture at the time. However, other archaeologists, such as Dr Robert Munro, then a crannog expert, were not convinced. The finds led to a long-running debate, which at times became very personal and unpleasant. Archive material such as newspaper cuttings and personal letters chart the conversations between the excavators in the west and the archaeological ‘big guns’ in the east. Donnelly died in 1905 and the controversy ebbed away like a falling tide. Subsequently, the small finds made their way to the National Museum of Scotland where they are still stored. Recent re-evaluation of the finds makes it clear that they were forgeries, possibly created by more than one person and certainly some of them were made to look like some of the visitors whom can to see the excavations.

A programme of re-evaluation of the site since 1998 by Alex Hale (HES), Rob Sands (University College Dublin) and more recently with Piotr Jacobsson (SUERC) resulted in a number of new discoveries and enabled our understanding of the Clyde crannogs to develop. Small-scale excavations have established a better understanding of construction techniques and the timber dock where the log boat was housed was re-located. The site was re-mapped and a series of samples from the timber platform were taken for dating purposes. Scientific analysis of the samples, by radiocarbon dating and something called ‘Wiggle matching’ has narrowed down the construction of Dumbuck to between AD 5 and AD 55 (Jacobsson et al 2017).

But during the excavation in the summer of 2000, Alex and Rob discovered another ‘queer thing’ amongst the timbers of the platform. Clearly the objects are fakes and they do not relate to the later Iron Age, when the crannog was built, but who put them there remains the unsolved mystery of Dumbuck crannog.

Sources:

Dixon T N (2004) The Crannogs of Scotland. Tempus Publishing, Stroud.

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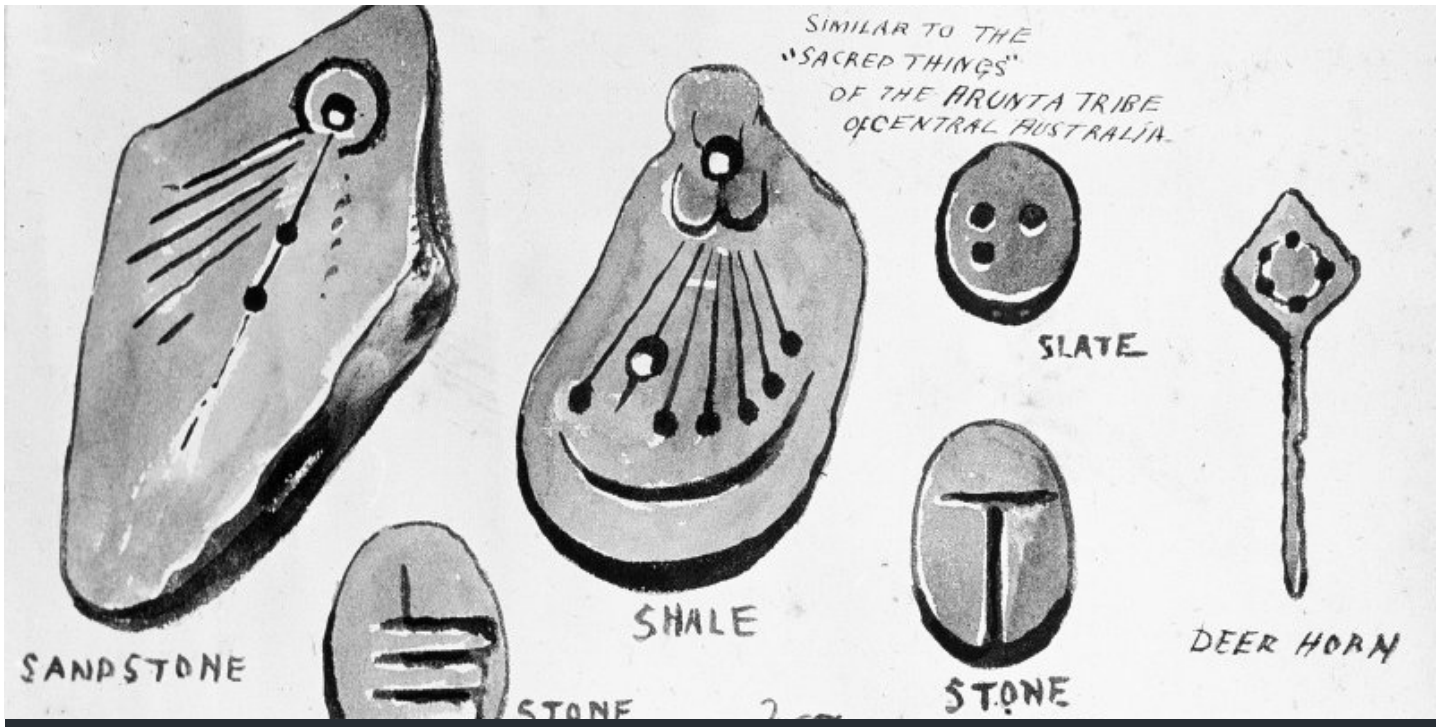
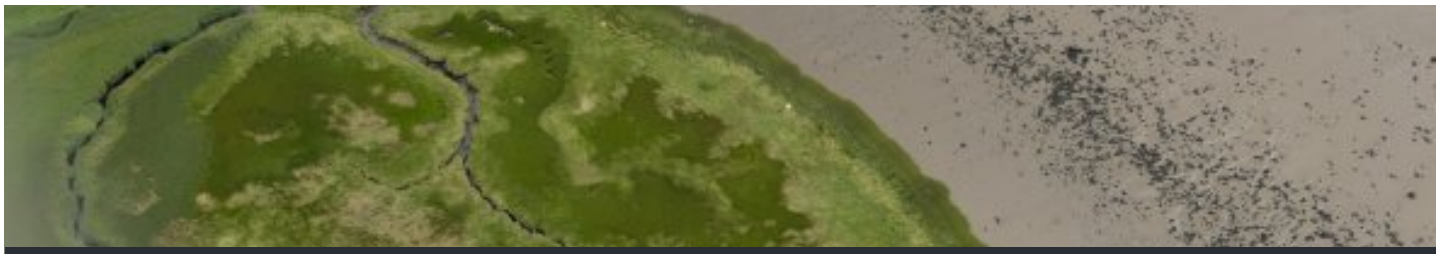
Dr Alex Hale - Archaeology Projects Manager



https://canmore.org.uk/site/43402/dumbuck
http://www.treasuredplaces.org.uk/in_focus/articles/Dumbuck+Crannog
http://collections.glasgowmuseums.com/cld.html?cid=534334



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