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Medieval 'Viking' Canal – Rubh' An Dunain, Isle of Skye Highland





A Medieval canal

Reached only by a solitary track, Loch na h-Aide (possibly, 'The Loch of the Point') is situated within a complex landscape of both prehistoric and historic remains, that includes a scheduled chambered cairn, a cliff-top dun, a number of hut circles and two pre-improvement townships with their associated field systems. The area was occupied until the 1860's when, after thousands of years of possibly continuous use, the peninsular was finally abandoned.

To the modern eye this area fronting the Cuillin Mountains is absolutely desolate, but our judgement is clouded by our dependence upon modern transport links. The communities who lived here were evidently quite comfortable in this environment and some were also masters of the Atlantic seaways.

On the south side of Loch na h-Airde there was once a small stream that ran from the freshwater lochen to the open sea. A naturally sheltered cove below the dun would have offered protection to a vessel where this stream reaches the sea, but at some point (perhaps about a thousand years ago) the stream was converted into a canal to allow sea-faring vessels to enter the lochen simply by means of the rising tide. The canal, which is roughly 120m long, 3.5m wide and at high water about 0.5m deep, includes in its lower section two stone-lined docks and their accompanying nausts - both allowing vessels to be hauled out of the water. The upper section of the canal, which is neatly lined with stone revetments is blocked by a mass of boulders. This essentially destroyed the function of the canal, although it may well have fallen from use a long time before.

It is possible that the vessels that availed themselves of this waterway were similar to birlinns. These were a oak-built craft propelled by sail and oar that are known to have been in use in the West Highlands of Scotland from at least the 12th century AD.





Take the trip and see it for yourself

The true ingenuity of the canal is its relationship with the tides. At low tide the canal is impassable and only a small stream links the loch to the ocean. However, when the tide rises about 1.5m, the seawater swells upwards and floods into the lochen; and for a short period around high tide, vessels could safely enter the lochen. This remarkable feat of engineering is a rare survivor and if similar constructions once existed elsewhere, it is likely that they have been built over.

Since the character of the canal was recognised by Roger Miket in the late 1980s, it has been the subject of a number of investigations, including detailed mapping and aerial photography; while the lochen, itself, has been explored underwater. The driving force behind the most recent episode of research has been Colin and Paula Martin, but exploration by Dr David MacFayden at the northern end of the loch in 2000 AD revealed an oak boat-timber that has since been radiocarbon dated to around 1100 AD. This raises questions about Viking and Norse activity in the area, or whether these works were undertaken in the equally poorly documented era that led to the rise of the Lordship of the Isles.

The ebb and flow of the water in the canal is described by those who have witnessed it as an amazing phenomenon. So, if you are one of the thousands of visitors who flock to Isle of Skye every year, why not make the trek out to Rubh' an Dunain? Moreover, unlike the famous fairy pools near Glenbrittle, it is likely that you will have this remarkable site all to yourself.

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<https://canmore.org.uk/site/11028/skye-rubh-an-dunain-viking-canal>
<http://her.highland.gov.uk/SingleResult.aspx?uid=MHG4895>
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