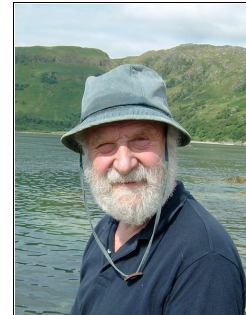




## **Rubh' an Dùnain Skye's Hidden Heritage - Discover a lost settlement**

**By Dr Colin Martin**

Until retirement, Colin was Reader in Maritime Studies at St Andrews University, and an acknowledged world authority on marine archaeology. He is past-President, now an honorary vice-President of the Nautical Archaeology Society and a member of the UK government's Advisory Committee on Historic Shipwrecks. He runs the Morvern Maritime Centre with his wife Dr Paula Martin, also an archaeologist, and remains engaged in a maritime landscape study of Scotland's western seaboard.



### **A Highway Into History**

Rubh' an Dùnain is an isolated peninsula on the south-western edge of Skye jutting from beneath the Cuillin Hills. It may seem remote and inaccessible today, accustomed as we are to transport by land, but when the sea was the main highway this was a key location for settlement.

From remote pre-history until its final abandonment in 1854, Rubh' an Dùnain has been a dynamic hub of human activity. Mesolithic groups left flints hereabouts to mark their seasonal hunting and gathering cycles, and around 5000 years ago the first farmers began to put down their roots. It was they who built the magnificent chambered cairn beside the loch.

People with metal came next, leaving traces of their round-houses in the landscape. Some time in late pre-history (around 2500 years ago), Iron Age folk built the fort – or Dun – on the headland that has given the place its name. It was probably occupied over many centuries as pre-history slid into early history with the coming of written records. No doubt the place saw periods of stability and prosperity as its people went about their daily routines by land and sea, interspersed with episodes of natural disaster, violence and change.

Around 800 AD the Norsemen came. Whether they ousted the people already here or integrated with them we don't know, but they founded a dynasty on Skye which in time became the great clan – the Macleods of Dunvegan.

Another group of Scandinavian incomers, the MacAskills, also came to Skye and their Norse overlords, the Kings of Man, appointed them wardens of Dun Sgathaich Castle (G. *fort of the shadow*) on Sleat.

They later became the Macleods' *comites litores* or coast-watchers, based at Rubh' an Dùnain. The last family to leave the peninsula, in 1854, were MacAskills.

A long gully runs beneath the headland fort, linking the sea with two artificially constructed hollows, or nausts. Each has a lower dock into which vessels could float on a rising tide, and an upper recess where they could be pulled high and dry. Stones have been removed to leave a clear channel along the approach gully as far as the docks, and where necessary its sides were stabilised with rough masonry.

This channel was later extended to provide access to the loch with a 100-metre cut, or canal, with stone-built sides.



### **An Exciting Discovery**

For many years this feature has been known locally as 'The Viking Canal', though expert opinion remained sceptical about its origins and antiquity. In March 1995 two Skye archaeologists, Roger Miket and Adam Welfare conducted a survey of the loch and canal, and that summer Dr Nick Dixon of the Scottish Crannog Centre carried out a preliminary underwater search of the loch. It was extremely shallow and although much of the silty bottom was obscured by weed he spotted several pieces of timber, some of which looked as though they might be parts of boats. Nothing was touched or disturbed.

Roger's initiative awakened local interest and local archaeologist Dr David Macfadyen began his own exploration of the canal and the loch's margins. In the dry summer of 2000 he found, among the reeds at the north of the loch, a piece of timber which he recognised as part of a boat. It was subsequently carbon-dated to around 1100 A.D.

The timber is a *bite*, a light cross-beam which connected the sides of a small clinker-built vessel in the Norse tradition. Where it would have been fitted can be seen in the picture of a replica of the *faering* found with the Gokstad ship burial (right) in Norway of about 850 AD.

Such a vessel can hardly have had a functional purpose on this tiny and very shallow loch which didn't lead anywhere. It must have been there for some other reason. It, and perhaps larger craft, could have been built on the lochside with the



intention of taking them out to the sea via the canal. Or they might have been brought into the loch from the sea for maintenance, repair, or safe harbourage, particularly during winter. In any event the find of the *bite* strongly suggests that the canal, or some precursor of it, was functioning by the early 12<sup>th</sup> century.

David Macfadyen's find and Roger Miket's survey caught the attention of Historic Scotland and a meeting of stakeholders was held in 2008. Funding was allocated for a site assessment in May 2009 under direction of the respected marine archaeologist Colin Martin and the Morvern Maritime Centre. The team included Roger Miket, David Caldwell, Martin Wildgoose, Chris Burgess, Richard Tipping, Paula Martin, and her sons Peter and Edward. Unfortunately the track to the headland proved too much for a hired 4x4, so the group had to walk in and out each day – a 13 kilometre round trip – usually in the rain.

The time-consuming trek, poor weather and problems with equipment, limited what could be accomplished during the first visit, though a good preliminary survey was made as a foundation for further work.



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Future visits had to be more adaptable, and capable of being mounted at short notice when a good weather window was assured. For some years the Martin husband and wife team had been looking at maritime cultural landscapes in the west, and they'd bought a small inflatable boat which could be carried on a car roof.- Providing the sea was calm this provided easy and relatively quick transport for people and equipment, to the site from the beach at Glen Brittle.

A research partnership had also been developed with the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS, pronounced 'arcams') for short - through Dave Cowley, their aerial survey manager. His flying in the west already had a distinctively maritime focus, and for some years Colin Martin had been accompanying him on coastal sorties along the Argyll mainland and among the Inner Hebrides. In 2009 Rubh' an Dùnain became a prime target.

An aerial viewpoint from much lower altitudes has also proved extremely helpful. Edward Martin, a professional archaeological photographer, has built an integrated system for transforming aerial photographs taken from a small drone, into accurate 2- and 3-dimensional 'fly-through' surveys with objective stone-by-stone detail. Because it's often difficult on complex sites like this to distinguish natural stone distributions from those moved by humans, precision and objectivity are crucial.

It's all too easy, especially from ground level, to see patterns where no patterns exist, or fail to spot patterns which only become clear when viewed from above. The dividing lines between objectivity, subjectivity, and interpretation are never easy to define in archaeology.

Drones have achieved some notoriety for their modern military uses – here they are helping to increase our knowledge of past civilisations.

In 2012 the scientific team contributed to a BBC documentary, during which drone sorties covered the canal/naust complex and the headland fort allowing us to identify clearly the submerged stone-built quay where the canal enters the loch.

The aerial surveys were integrated with the 2009 research results to generate a comprehensive non-intrusive plan of the site which has refined archaeological interpretations and helped develop strategies for further investigation and management.

### **Current Thinking**

So what's our current thinking about Rubh an Dùnain? What was this intriguing site used for and when?

First, the Dun or headland fort itself. This feature has never been excavated, and this is the first modern survey. The fort is typical of the architectural traditions of the Atlantic Iron Age (around 800BC to AD100), with drystone construction, intra-mural gallery, rebated entrance, and a low scarcement on the interior side. Although erosion has reduced both ends of the wall and rockfall has removed what is probably a substantial area of the cliff-girt headland beyond, the structure is clearly a rampart defining and defending the promontory tip.



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Similar forts can be seen elsewhere, notably at Barra Head in the Outer Hebrides and at Dunbeg on the Dingle Peninsula in County Kerry. However, as Professor Dennis Harding of Edinburgh University has pointed out, Rubh'an Dùnain is not a promontory fort in the strict sense, in that it does not exploit a narrow neck for its shoreward security.

On the contrary, its strength is reduced by the widening platform on its shoreward side. It seems to have been sited more for ostentation than defence, and perhaps the extra-mural platform was in some way associated with this. The fort's visual aspect from the sea is equally impressive.

No site-specific dating is available for the fort, but its architectural characteristics suggest an origin in late prehistory. Such structures often continued to be used into early historic times, as several excavated examples have shown. Of possible significance in this respect are faint traces of what may be a secondary rectangular building abutting the fort wall near its eastern end.

We think that the fort was positioned to exercise power in its coastal landscape, as well as to project influence towards the sea, no doubt as an element in a wider maritime network. A factor in determining its location was undoubtedly the natural gully which would have allowed medium-sized boats to be brought to a sheltered and hidden place beneath its walls. Whether the nausts or docks were contemporary with the original fort, or a later enhancement, cannot be determined on present evidence.

But it may be significant that the fort wall, though its ends have been lost to erosion, does not appear to have been seriously robbed. The rectangular stones of which it was built were of the same shapes and sizes as those used to enhance the access gully and line the nausts. That the fort's stones were left undisturbed suggests that fort, cleared boat access, and docks were all parts of a coherent scheme, whether at the time of the fort's construction or at some later date.

### **How it developed**

Today, archaeologists believe the phases of development were . . .

- Phase 1 is the building of the fort, its siting dictated by the availability of a suitable rocky headland with a good anchorage close by and an adjacent natural inlet with a safe boat-landing.
- Phase 2 is the enhancing of the access channel by stone clearance and revetment, and the provision of nausts or docks.
- Phase 3 - Evidence for a third phase is provided by the western edge of the canal opposite the northernmost naust. Here the character of the stonework changes abruptly from the large rectangular stones which characterise the previous enhancement of the lower access channel, on the left, to the smaller rubble stonework of the upper canal, on the right. From this archaeologists deduce that Phase 3 involved a continuation of the access channel as a canal into the loch, with the provision of boulder quays on either side of the entrance.



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- The two quays, now submerged, show up well in aerial and underwater shots. The presence in the loch of a *faering* dated to around the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century suggests – though it does not prove – that Phase 3 had been completed by this date. On this basis the local tradition of a 'Viking' canal may not be too wide of the mark.
- Phase 4 involved the widening of the canal by dismantling the eastern stonework and casting its stones onto the bank beyond. Local tradition asserts that this was done by clansmen to bring their galleys into the loch, which suggests a date in the relatively recent historic past.
- Phase 5 – A final phase is represented by the extensive but jumbled blockage in the middle of the upper canal which holds the water in the loch at a more or less constant level. Its purpose cannot be determined without excavation, but the possibility that it may have been associated with a tide mill is supported by local tradition.
- A more controllable arrangement – perhaps a sluice gate – would have been necessary when the canal was functioning, to keep vessels afloat between tides if the loch had been used for winter harbourage.

Traces of four buildings have been identified within the complex, but without excavation they cannot be related to the phasing.

1. A possible rectangular structure within the fort;
2. A round-ended building which overlies the revetment of the western naust;
3. Fugitive remains lie between the nausts; and
4. Another round-ended rectangular building near the canal's entrance to the loch.

*If the archaeologists are right, or even partly so, Rubh' an Dùnain has been an essential element in the subsistence, security, the maintenance and management of sea craft, and the projection of power, among a succession of maritime communities for centuries – if not millennia.*

This is truly a multi-period and multi-functional site for which the sea is the linking strand. That the canal may have continued in use until fairly recent times might explain the well-preserved condition of some of its structure, without necessarily disproving the antiquity of the original concept.

At no time will Rubh' an Dùnain have stood alone. Archaeologists today can't hope to reconstruct every aspect of the complex, dynamic, and ever-changing networks of contact and interaction, facilitated by the mobility of waterborne transport, within which such a place functioned through the ages.

But we can glimpse one such connection. The island of Eigg lies only 27 kilometres away – a 3-hour boat trip under good conditions. There, on the farm at Laig, the two end pieces of a clinker-built boat were found during drainage operations some time



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before 1878. They were distinctively Norse, and have been carbon-dated to around 1000 AD. One was unfinished, and the timbers had evidently been buried for seasoning. The place where they were found was said at the time to have formerly been 'a lake, which the Norsemen used as a winter harbour for their galleys'. The report added that 'a gap in the ridges of shingle, probably an old water channel, was pointed out as the canal by which they drew them to the lake'.

The outline of the former loch can be reconstructed approximately by following the 10-metre contour at this point. The levels would not have allowed a canal from the sea, but in every other respect the parallel with Rubh'an Dùnain is striking, and the short stretch from the beach to the loch through one of the stream channels would have been an easy portage. Immediately above the former loch is a steep bluff called *Sron na Laimhrig* – the rock of the landing place.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century a native of Eigg recorded a tradition of lookout posts in clan times. He noted: 'There is a *Dunan Thalamh Sgeir* on Rubha an Dunan on Skye and *Dunan Thalamh Sgeir* on the island of Eigg. One can be seen from the other, and when a fire was seen on one, the other could respond. There was always a watchman on the dun day and night and if he fell asleep he had to die.'

The Eigg Thalamh Sgeir can readily be identified as *Dunan Thaliskeir*, a variant of *Tallisker*, meaning the building on the rock. The name is recorded at the end of Eigg's impressive northern ridge, at a height of over 300 metres. From there it looks across Laig Bay to the *Laimhrig* or landing place 3 kilometres away, and towards Rubh'an Dùnain 27 kilometres distant. The corresponding *Dunan Thalamh Sgeir* on Skye is not mentioned on any modern map, but the headland fort at Rubh'an Dùnain – which could very aptly be described as 'the building on the rock' – is surely a prime candidate.

### **Solving the Riddles: What needs to be done**

So what does the future hold for this mysterious and precious area which has already yielded some of its secrets but must have many more to reveal? In the short to medium term, we need to understand its environmental history more fully and especially the nature and effects of sea level change. Stirling University has already done trial corings in Loch na h-Airde, and has identified a small lochan on higher ground as a likely source for pollen sampling.

Second, we need to search the loch bed more effectively, looking particularly for further boat remains. Because it's so shallow snorkelling searches are difficult – divers can't get far enough away to see more than what lies just below their nose. Some kind of glass-bottomed boat is a possibility.

Again because of the shallowness, geophysical techniques also present difficulties. But new techniques are being developed, and future years may produce results we can scarcely imagine today.

Some carefully-targeted excavation might also be considered. A prime focus would be the small building between the boat docks. If we could get a date for this structure, and determine its relationship to the nausts, theories about the phases of the site could be tested and, hopefully, enhanced.



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Careful and limited clearance of surface stones from the canal blockage might also help to explain this enigmatic structure. Finally, a good chronology for the headland fort and the possible building inside it would be desirable, though achieving that would be more ambitious.

### **Only the Best Survived**

What can now be said – with some confidence – is that the Vikings **were** here. But so too were lots of other seafaring peoples, before and after them. The Iron Age people who built the dun and the boat-docks beside it must have been intimately familiar with these waters. So too must the Dark Age warriors, holy men, Vikings and later clansmen who followed in their wake.

And while little is known of the various boats-types involved, all must have been seaworthy and competently handled. These waters are no place for the ignorant or foolhardy, and only the very best will have survived.

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