

Port nan Long and Dun an Sticir

Mary Harman inspected and photographed many of the Historical and Archaeological sites on North Uist in the 1970's. She kindly donated copies of her photographs to CEUT and I had the opportunity to inspect these in 2019.

The third archaeological walk of this summer takes us to the area around Port nan Long, 'The Harbour of the Ships'. Tradition accords the name is derived from the time a ship of the Spanish Armada fleet, returning to Spain, sailed past the Hebrides and struck a reef off Pabbaigh before being driven across the Sound of Boirearaigh to founder off Bhosinis, Bearnaraigh in 1588. The poop and decks came ashore at Port nan Long, east of Rudha-na-h'Iulain at the base of Sudhanais. It was visible for centuries up to 1946. Spanish coins have been found at Boirearaigh, Bearnaraigh, and Bailemhicphail.

This area is said to have been the place the Macleods, who fought in the Battle of Càirinis, landed and left their boats.

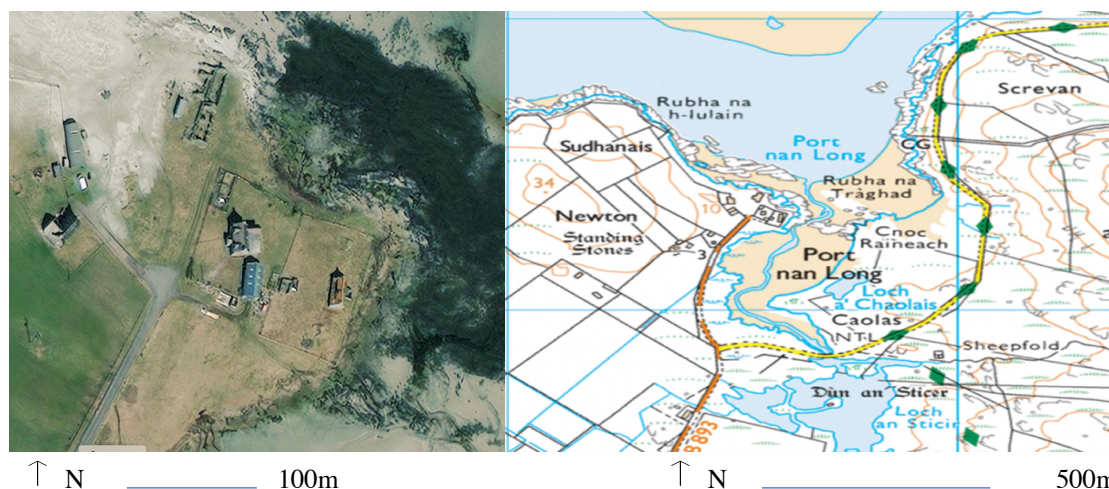
Some old cottages remain at Port nan Long, visible on the Satellite Image below.

Port nan Long

Canmore OS map of area

<https://gridreferencefinder.com/#gr=NF8972677670/>

https://canmore.org.uk/search/site?SIMPLE_KEYWORD=balivanich&view=map



People have lived in this area since the Neolithic (4100BC-2500BC). Evidence exists people lived across the Caolas na Hearadh on na Hearadh in the earlier Mesolithic period. Charred Hazelnut shells have been excavated and dated to the Mesolithic (7060-6650BC) at An Taobh Tuath (Gregory et al. 2005).

Standing Stones, Crois Mhic Jamain (Canmore 10317)

400m SW of Port nan Long at the base of Sudhanais are two grass-covered mounds with standing stones. On the summit of each lies a Standing Stone. Most Standing Stones date to the Neolithic and Bronze Age but with this name they are possibly later stones or were named in Christian times.

Mounds are archaeological sites of an accumulation of soil, sand, and middens often overlying hidden structures. Some mounds excavated on the Uists reveal Neolithic, Beaker, and Bronze Age pottery. These mounds have not been excavated.



Crois Mhic Jamain copyright RCAHMS 1914

<https://canmore.org.uk/site/10317/north-uist-port-nan-long-crois-mhic-jamain>

Cists

A Cist is a stone-built coffin structure which enclosed bones. They date from the Bronze Age (2500BC). A cist was found in 1840 by the west of the road south of Port nan Long. It contained human bones (Canmore 10301). Beveridge (1911) found a cist on the beach at Faoghail a'Chaolais (Canmore 10304) southeast of the Standing Stones. Described as a massive rectangular erection subsequent investigation indicated the stones may be natural. Three stone cists were ploughed up in 1955 by John Macaskill, SW of the Standing Stones (Canmore 10297). One of these cists contained a crouched burial of a female. Beveridge found more cists on the slope of Rubha na Tràghad (Canmore 10315) to the East of Port nan Long with a Bronze brooch, flint, pottery, a clay crucible, iron slag and a Viking rivet.

Dun an Sticir

A large Iron Age (800BC-400AD) dun or broch (18m diameter) lies on the tidal Loch an Sticir. There are three islands in this loch. The eastern island with the broch and the western island, Eilean na Mi-Chomhairle (Island of Bad Council), are interconnected by a stone causeway and by a causeway and steppingstones to another small island and the shore. The Dun is noted on Blaeu's Atlas of Scotland of 1645 as Dunamich.

Dun an Sticir from South.
Courtesy of M. Harman CEUT 1974



Blaeu Atlas of Scotland 1645.

<https://maps.nls.uk/view/00000489>



The broch walls rise to 2.4m. The main entrance faces SW. The central court is elliptical, similar to Dun Torcuill, which lies 4.5km to the South.

A Late Medieval house was built into the centre of the broch which is associated with Ùisdean MacGilleEasbuig Chlèirich who was Ballie to North Uist in 1588 and the son of Archibald the Clerk. They were descended from Hugh MacDonald of Sleat who founded Clan Huistein.

Ùisdean claimed part of North Uist and plotted against a relative, Donald Gorm Mor, chief of the MacDonalds of Sleat and North Uist. Ùisdean took refuge in 1601-1602 in Dun an Sticir with his stepmother. Donald Gorm sent a party of men to capture him. Captured, he was starved or fed salted meat till he died in the dungeon of Duntulm Castle, Skye, the seat of the Clan. There are several versions of this event which are interesting to read (Beveridge 142:1911, Lawson 143:2004).

Was this episode the reason the dun became named Dun an Sticir, the Dun of the Skulker? The word Sticir is a later name than could not have come from the time the Dun was built for Gaelic was not a language used in the Iron Age. This broch has not been excavated fully but Beveridge (1911) found the remains of bones, shells, and ancient pottery. If excavation were undertaken, we would have a better understanding as to the date and construction of these structures.

Conclusion

The whole area has been lived in for thousands of years from the Neolithic to the current modern period. Nearby on the area to the east, at Screvan, prior to construction of the new causeway and road to Bearnaraigh, much valuable information was discovered from the small-scale excavations undertaken which identified cairns, cists, prehistoric stone sites, earth banks, and settlement activity. It is very likely that under the grass, sand, and peat around Port nan Long there are many similar finds to be identified.

References

- Beveridge, E. (1911) *North Uist; its archaeology and topography, with notes upon the early history of The Outer Hebrides*. Edinburgh: William Brothers
Canmore <https://canmore.org.uk/>
- Gregory, R. A., Murphy, E. M., Church, M. J., Edwards, K. J., Guttman, E. B. and Simpson, D. D. A. (2005) 'Archaeological evidence for the first Mesolithic occupation of the Western Isles of Scotland.' *The Holocene* 15 (7). pp. 944-950.
- Lawson, B. (2011) *North Uist in History and Legend*. Edinburgh: Birlinn

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