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Symposium: A rock and a hard place: perspectives on the archaeology of St Kilda, Scotland

Hovels, Hidey-Holes Or Houses For The Dead; The Scree Structures Of Mullach Sgar, Hirta, St Kilda.

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Scree covers a large proportion of the slopes of Mullach Sgar, most of the remaining areas being grass covered scree. Within all screes there is a considerable diversity of igneous rock types represented though dolerite predominates. In addition to compositional variation, there is also a wide variety of textural variation within the rock types represented. In particular, one doleritic rock type exhibits a distinctive ringing sound when struck. This characteristic is indicative of 'hornfelsing', a geological process broadly akin to annealing in metalworking. This process results in a rock which is very hard and durable but which at the same time is capable of being struck and flaked. It is this particular type of rock which appears to have been sought after by past St. Kildan populations in order to create the blade like artifacts identified on Hirta by Fleming and others.

Aside from artifacts, evidence for past human utilisation of the screes is rich. On close inspection several fundamental things become apparent. The most significant of these being that the Mullach Sgar screes contain innumerable terraces. These are easily observable in certain light conditions and the obvious interpretation of such features is that they are sheep tracks. However, such an interpretation is unsustainable after careful consideration; the terraces run horizontally, parallel to one another and are separated by roughly 2m and although the resident Soay sheep population clearly make use of the terraces in crossing the slopes, it would seem very unlikely that any past Soay population had the ability to create such precise structures. The terraces may have resulted from stone sorting exercises, either as a by-product of this exercise or as a by-product of it. Alternatively, it is possible that they represent an attempt to stabilise the scree and minimise the potential for slippage onto something important below. What this might have been is difficult to imagine. There are few obviously extant remains visible below the screes today; a few small cultivation plots and a number of those most ubiquitous of structures, cleitan, but this is not to deny that there was something of profound importance there in the past.

The next class of feature discernable, when the observers eye atunes itself to picking out detail from the mass of stones, are walls. Why would any one need to demarcate or enclose expanses of loose rock? Most of the walls snake their way across the slope, seemingly at random, close to the bottom of the scree. They might conceivably have provided some protection from minor inundation from above, but at least one rises straight from the base of the scree to a point close to a quarry face in the exposed rockface high above.

The most striking features within the scree are undoubtedly the cellular structures which appear to be unique, certainly within a St. Kildan context if not elsewhere. The example identified in 1995 is situated in the lower reaches of a scree to the north of Clash na Bearnaich. The remains are situated in, not on, a broad platform in the scree. The structure is represented by two partially collapsed, elongated corbelled 'chambers', the more northerly being narrower and more elongated than the southernmost and suggestive of an entrance passage. Such an impression may be completely erroneous given that the 'passage' possesses no entrance aperture at ground level. It may be that the way into the structure was from above; there is one surviving lintel bridging the gap between the eastern and western passage walls, with the partial remains of what is perhaps another less than a metre away. At the southernmost extremity of the 'passage', two upright slabs located directly below the lintel partially constrict it just before it opens out into the southerly chamber.

The eastern wall is perforated at ground level by a drain. Although the floor levels of both passage and chamber are buried beneath a considerable volume of collapsed stonework, there is no evidence of anything that might have been used as a lintel in or above the southern chamber. It is reasonable to assume that the primary architectural technique employed in the construction of the scree structure was essentially similar to that seen in both Calum Mors house in Village Bay, The Amazons house in Gleann Mor and the various 'lamb folds' also in Gleann Mor. This and other scree structures do, however, differ from the aforementioned examples in several respects, most of which appear to be result of their physical situation. In essence the structures are exceedingly well concealed, especially from below, though whether this was intentional or more a product of the manner in which they were constructed is a debatable point.

The method of construction appears to have involved the creation of a level platform by quarrying into the back of the slope at the same time pushing the quarried material forward in order to create a 'step' in the scree. A corbelled structure of the desired shape and dimensions was then built upon the platform. Such structures are self-supporting as ably demonstrated by Callum Mor's House although that structure is constructed of altogether more massive masonry. Once the structure was complete, the whole thing appears to have been re-buried with scree material. It would seem unlikely that this was a deliberate attempt at disguising the structure but the act of re-burying does obscure the edges of the platform and any revetment that might otherwise be visible from below. Corbelled structures are only stable if the masonry is of sufficient size and weight to maintain inertia and the scree structure was constructed of the fairly small stones freely available in the scree. These stones are light enough to shift under the slightest provocation and the act of burying the structure with more scree would lend the required weight needed to maintain structural integrity.

The structure identified in 1995 motivated a survey aimed at locating further structures within the scree. At least thirteen further potential sites were recognised but none were as complete or as obvious as the outstanding 1995 structure. Although many areas had 'possible' examples, only completely convincing structures were recorded. Many had been largely destroyed by the quarrying activities of later St. Kildans who required suitable stone to build cleits.

During the course of the 1996 survey, a further type of scree structure was identified. These were again corbelled, this time circular and only partially buried in scree. The evidence for an entrance to the typical example of this type was, at the time of the survey, unconvincing but it was thought that if one did exist then it faced across the slope. This second category of structure is very difficult to identify within the scree. Collapsed examples are easy enough to see, but since the structures and platforms are so much smaller than the elongated types, these sites are almost indistinguishable from their surroundings when complete.

1997 saw the first excavation season in the screes. Several sites were chosen for possible excavation but some proved to be too unstable to be worked upon safely. In the end, 3 sites were opened in 1997, and completed in 1998.

The first of these (SS 1) proved to be a long flanked shaped structure, constructed of drystone walling, closed at its southern end in a sharp parabolic curve. The wall lines to the north exhibited a slight pinching, and terminated at a rough, crudely constructed threshold or blockage. The wall at the closed end was perforated by what appears to be a drainage aperture surmounted by a substantial lintel. Both the up and downslope wall 'heads' exhibited evidence of corbaling though none of this survived intact to the full height of the structure. Nothing that could have been used as a lintel bridging the wall heads was recovered from the fill. The most peculiar aspect of SS1 is that it did not possess a floor, or any other formalised 'activity surface'. The fill of the structure was composed of various deposits of collapsed material and glutinous, black peat wash and once this was excavated, a deposit of stone dressing fragments was encountered. This deposit was demonstrated to partly underlie the wall of the structure and could not be entirely removed without precipitating a collapse. Where it was possible to remove some of the deposit, natural scree was revealed. It appears that the method of construction of SS1 broadly conformed to the model previously proposed. A platform was first quarried in the scree with the structure then constructed upon this. Over at least part of the platform a layer of stone chippings was laid to create a more uniform surface on which to build. If this deposit was the floor level of the structure, then the structure cannot have seen prolonged use or occupation. Typically no finds that might provide a cultural or chronological indicator were recovered during the course of the excavation, however a few coarse stone blades were recovered from the upper layers of the fill of the structure.

The second structure to be investigated (SS 2) was located within a few metres of the first. Once again the structure was filled with deposits of collapse and peat wash. However removal of these revealed a laid stone floor, which clearly overlay the basal courses of the beautifully constructed subcircular, corbelled drystone wall. This wall was perforated by an entrance aperture in the southeast of the structure, the corbaling above it being supported on a substantial, if oddly shaped, lintel. Immediately to the

right of the entrance, a drainage aperture further perforated the wall, the base of which lay below the level of the floor. Upon removal of the floor, the drain cut was visible in a deposit of stone dressing fragments set in a clay matrix. Upon removal of the clay natural scree was encountered. No finds were recovered from the deposits above the floor of the structure, but a cache of 4 blade-like artifacts were discovered within a few centimetres of one another in the layer beneath the floor.

Excavation has revealed three types of structure. We do not know if the structures are contemporary, or even near contemporary because of a distinct lack of dating evidence.

To return to our friend Sands - he wrote: "on the face of a hill called Sgar.....is an ancient building, which tradition says was used as a hiding place in times of danger" He continues "It had been covered in stones, but was found again last summer. I went and threw out the rubbish" (Sands. 1877.188) This interpretation of the structure is supported by an account of the local inhabitants of St. Kilda disappearing into man made caves when the British army visited the islands, seeking Bonny Prince Charlie, after the Jacobite uprisings of 1745 though where those 'caves' were situated is unclear. Both of these references were sufficient for other authors to perpetuate the function of the scree structure as a refuge. It will be argued that this is unlikely to have been the primary function of any of the scree structures. A secondary exploitation of this nature might have occurred, and the structures are well camouflaged from below, but any individual attempting to bolt into these holes would have been plainly visible from any vessel entering Village Bay. They are simply in the wrong place to be effective Hidey-Holes.

At the moment, no DIRECT parallels for the scree structures of Mullach Sgar have been identified, for one reason alone, they are built in scree. In terms of shape and dimension (we do not have any chronological indicators) there are some rays of hope. The aubergine shaped structure has a parallel, in terms of shape and apparent construction technique, in Cornwall. This walled grave, one of several discovered in the Churchyard of St Matriana's church, Tintagel, mirrors the shape of the scree structure even down to the edge-on slab closing the 'open' end of the structure. The excavators of the walled grave are of the opinion that they were perhaps earlier than the 12th century by analogy to examples found at Bodmin Priory (Nowakowski and Thomas.1992.19). Unfortunately, this example doesn't fit in terms of dimension, with the St. Kilda structure being twice the length of the Tintagel Churchyard example. Nor is it's situation even remotely similar. Or is it? The Tintagel structure is situated within an ecclesiastical environment, not scree, but we don't know the 'status' of the scree to past St. Kildans.

Expanding upon the theme, SS4 is clearly a beehive structure with excellent parallels in Ireland where they are referred to as Clochain. By far the greatest concentration of clochain in Ireland is on the Dingle peninsula, with especially high densities occurring in coastal environments. They are also ubiquitous on the sort of Early Christian island monastic sites exemplified by Skellig Michael. The distribution of beehive huts, whatever their function in Ireland, extends northward from Dingle, via places like Innismurray and Slieve League, and into Scotland where examples are known at Eileach an Naoimh on the Garvellachs. Certain authors maintain that beehive huts of this type have a lot to do with adherents to, and pilgrims of the cults of Brendan and

Columba, seafaring Irish missionaries who were particularly active in the early Christian period.

So far only SS4 can be assigned a half-credible interpretation, but if it is a 'Hovel' why is it situated where it is? In his 1697 account, Martin Martin makes reference to three chapel sites, and indeed marks their positions on a map of the islands, executed by himself. He also observes that all three are built in a similar fashion, have churchyards assigned to them and are separated from one another by about a quarter of a mile (169*.445). Martin also reveals that the chapel in the Village was dedicated to Christ, and that the other chapels were dedicated to Columba and Brianan. The Rev. Kenneth MacAulay, who visited the islands in 1758 in his capacity as the islands missionary, also marks the positions of the chapels on a map and supplied an additional description. Of the chapel dedicated to Columbcille (MacAulay's change) he states that it "has neither alter cross nor cell within its precincts" but of Brendans (again MacAulay's change) chapel states he that it "has an altar within and some monkish cells without". From the tone of MacAulay's text, both chapels appear to be disused and partially ruinous at the time of writing. Later visitors, for example MacCulloch in 1815, Muir in 1858, Sands in 1875 and The Rev. Niel Mackenzie, incumbent between 1829 and 1843, record only the most ephemeral traces, or total absence of these two institutions. The sites of the three chapels are also marked on modern OS maps, as are their dedications; the church dedicated to Christ remains in the Village, the chapel dedicated to Columba is also situated within the confines of the head dyke of the Village and the chapel dedicated to Brendan is located on the lower slopes of Ruaival. These, the 'traditional' chapel sites, are not quarter of a mile apart, they are not even anywhere near equidistant from one another.

It is perhaps important not to place too heavy a reliance on Martin's descriptions, they are brief and vague, but they predate the smallpox epidemic of the 1720's and the subsequent, if partial, demographic change and the resulting effect on local knowledge that ensued. MacAulay's text apparently contradicts the direction of this paper, in his observation that Columbcilles chapel is devoid of cells within its precinct. Tenuous as though it may seem, if one removes Columbcilles chapel from it's now traditional site, and relocate it on the broad platform located directly below the densest concentration of scree structures, then the three chapels are more or less equidistant, though there is still slightly more than a quarter of a mile between each. If MacAulay was looking for 'monkish' cells at the traditional location of the chapel, he would have found none. If however, he was looking for them in this proposed alternative position, he wouldn't have seen them

It is tempting to view the chapel dedications to Brendan and Columba as being especially significant. It is also tempting to trawl through the *Navigatio Brendani* in search of references to 'islands with only one landing place' and 'islands of the birds', and believe me, they are there, but such descriptions could be indicative of one of any number of islands in the north Atlantic seaboard. Let us ignore all this for the minute and consider what Hirta would have to offer to the average ascetic. It is remote, even now it is difficult to get to but it is large enough to sustain life without constant contact with the outside world. However it is too large to be feasible as the exclusive site of a single monastery, and it is certainly not as harsh as the Irish Skellig and Innish sites. Assuming that St Kilda was visited by seafaring monks, it may have been that the archipelago was already sustaining one or more secular communities. Any

monastic institution established in such circumstances would have to be delimited by a physical or ritual boundary, a vallum monasterii, such as that on Iona. Such a device would be superfluous on the Irish island monasteries, the sea was the barrier but on Hirta, something would need to have been done. MacAulay used the term 'precinct' with reference to St. Columba's chapel, but what was his interpretation of that term? A monastic vallum is a conceptual device, it doesn't have to be a physical barrier just some form of notional boundary. Where better for a self-denying community to set up shop than in an improbable and otherwise useless environment, the limits of which could easily be defined to any pre-existing communities.

Perhaps this is going too far now, from a single putative beehive cell, I've now created an Early Christian Monastery. Where, is the Church? Where are the graves and where is there any other evidence, such as a suggestion of literacy that would support such an assertion?

There are at least two hovels, SS4 and there would seem to be a reasonable case that SS5 is also a hovel, it does have a drain and an alcove, conceivably a crub within its fabric. The highest density of other potential scree structures is in the immediate vicinity of these two. As for the others, they are both somewhat removed from this centre, one far above, and one at the base of Clash na Bearnaich. Neither structure is likely to have been habitative for reasons outlined before, and neither contained bones. If the structures were originally funerary structures, surely the alkaline environment created by basic and ultra basic geology would favour the preservation of human bone. This may be so, but the acid peat wash would not and the freely draining scree derived deposits the structures were built in could have further contributed to the complete dissolution of faunal remains. However, both structures took some considerable effort and enterprise to construct therefore both were of some considerable importance to the individuals that built them. They are situated at the margins of the scree but still within the ritual extents of my proposed institution, and although the monuments themselves are camouflaged out of necessity rather than intention, the scree itself is visible from all over the area where its significance would be appreciated. Although the practice might be considered unusual, situating mortuary structures at the margins of the institution would simply remove the more unpleasant aspects of the mortification of the flesh, from the epicentre of monastic life, possibly just for reasons of health. In any case, accommodating the dead in this manner would have the added bonus of avoiding attaching a ritual significance to a perfectly usable tract of agricultural land, a commodity in short supply on St Kilda, in order to dig flat graves. Besides, such an area would have had to have been located without the area defined by the conceptual vallum and therefore not good monastic practice.

Defining a monastery in terms of its excavated remains is difficult, especially if the roots of that institution lay in the Atlantic fringe of Christianity. There is no St Gall Plan for early Celtic Christian establishments, just as there were no hard and fast liturgical rules practiced by those communities in common. Each monastery was defined by itself, and the inhabitants of each practiced what they believed to be 'the way'. This has resulted in a rich variety of types of monastery of this period; they have little in common other than a concept, and the remains of a concept are difficult enough to see from a late 20th century perspective, let alone prove.

More fieldwork, and clearly more thinking remains to be undertaken with regard to the Scree Structures of Mullach Sgar. The one thing common to all monastic communities other than hermitages is a chapel or church, and to date we do not have one. I am perfectly prepared to be proven wrong on any aspect of my interpretations but I am convinced that these structures are too sophisticated, and simply in the wrong place for a simplistic, historiographical explanation. If Hidey-Holes were an essential part of the way of life for past St. Kildans, then they would have been much better off building them closer to home, in the screes of Chonachair. A retreat to these slopes would have been far more effectively accomplished, even at the last minute.