

THE OLISTADH PROJECT

Exploring the archaeology of rural settlement on Islay from c. AD 790-1900

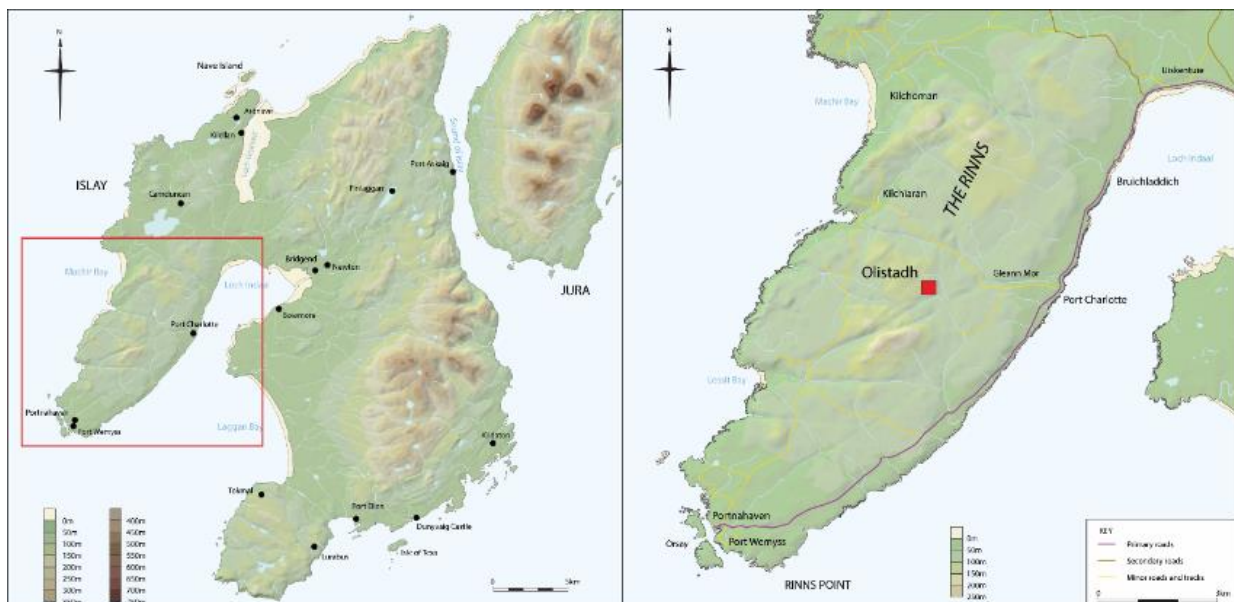
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The University of Reading and Islay Heritage are pleased to announce a new field project on Islay. This will involve three seasons of fieldwork at the site of Olistadh, located on the Rhinns peninsula. The project will use Olistadh as a case study to explore rural settlement on Islay from the 8th to the 19th century AD. The first season of fieldwork will be between 13 June and 9 July 2022.

Olistadh

The deserted township of Olistadh is well preserved and currently located in moorland. Initial inspection suggests several phases of house building at the site prior to conversion into a sheep farm in 1851 when the tenants were given notice to leave. The Old Norse *staðir* element of the placename suggests the settlement may have been established as early as the late 8th century (Caldwell 2005, 140).



The Isle of Islay and the settlement of Olistadh.

The project



Olistadh

The project will address research questions concerning medieval and later rural settlement, as briefly outlined below. The fieldwork will be used as a training school for University of Reading undergraduates studying archaeology. A series of community events will be organised around the excavation, including public lectures and school visits.

The first season of field work will take place between 13 June and 9 July 2022. This will comprise a detailed survey of its standing buildings and earthwork remains, a geophysics survey, and a series of test-trenches across selected features to establish their

character and preservation. Following this, two seasons of fieldwork will explore areas of the site by excavation, with the aim of establishing how the character and form of the settlement, and the material culture associated with it, developed over time.

Research questions

Viking incursions and Norse settlement on Islay

One of the core objectives of the Olistadh project is to locate Norse settlement on Islay. The island sits at a crossroads of the northern medieval world: located close to the Scottish mainland, no more than 40 kilometres from Ireland, on the western 'sea road' of Britain, an important highway from the earliest prehistoric times to the present day. Although the Viking incursions, Norse colonisation and the rise and fall of the Lordship of the Isles are all discussed and debated with reference to Islay, medieval rural settlement on this Hebridean island remains little explored by archaeologists.



Turf and stone-built walls at Olistadh of unknown date

While documentary and place-name evidence suggest Norse influence on Islay was extensive, in both physical and cultural terms, the credibility of this interpretation has been challenged, casting serious doubts as to the scale and impact of Viking Age colonisation (Macniven 2015; Waters 2013). Seven Viking burials are known from Islay, and up to 40% of the island's placenames derive from Old Norse; nevertheless, no definitive archaeological evidence for Viking Age settlement has been identified on Islay. That said, the only attempt to locate Viking Age farmsteads on Islay was more than 40 years ago, when Leslie and Elizabeth Alcock (1978) investigated deserted farmsteads with Norse names in the south of the island, searching for the large boat-shaped Scandinavian-type of Norse structures known from Orkney and Shetland. More recent archaeological evidence from South Uist, however, indicates that Norse settlers may have rapidly adopted a Hebridean style of rectangular architecture, quite different from the bow-shaped longhouses Alcock was searching for (Sharples & Parker-Pearson 1999). Was that also the case for Islay?

Late medieval and later rural settlement on Islay

Exploring late- and post-medieval rural settlement on Islay is the second key objective of the Olistadh Project. While much scholarly attention has been paid to the study and excavation of the MacDonald centres of Finlaggan and Dunyvaig Castle on Islay, we know relatively little about how these large-scale political formations influenced contemporary rural life (Caldwell 2008; Mithen 2021). Indeed, we know virtually nothing about the configuration of rural communities prior to the emergence of the townships of the 18th century. Moreover, despite being a distinctive element of the Islay landscape, none of the townships on Islay have been explored by archaeology.



Olistadh provides an ideal settlement to explore late- and post-medieval settlement on Islay. The standing remains suggests several phases of development prior to the 19th century. The 1836 rental records list five tenants for Olistadh: Alex McPhaden, Ronald McCaffer, Angus bell, John McNeil and Alexander Mc Alister. It is known that Ronald McCaffer has been born at Olistadh in 1805. The project has the possibility of identifying the specific houses of these tenants and making new insights into their daily lives.

19th century ruined houses with traces of earlier build at Olistadh

Acknowledgement

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