MEDIEVAL AND LATER SETTLEMENT ON THE ISLAND OF ISLAY

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY AND EXCAVATION AT THE TOWNSHIP OF OLISTADH

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Summary

This report documents the results of archaeological fieldwork undertaken by the authors and staff and students from the University of Reading at the township of Olistadh, Islay, Scotland. Forming part of the University of Reading Field School, the work was carried out during four weeks in June and July 2022 and consisted of a programme of analytical earthwork survey and archaeological excavation. The fieldwork was undertaken as an element of the Inhabiting the Inner Hebrides Project, a three-year research project aimed at improving understanding of medieval and later settlement practices on the Island of Islay. A key objective of this project is to shed light on evidence for physical and chronological variety in the region's settlement remains, and Olistadh was selected as one of the project's case-study sites for detailed investigation. First documented in the crown rentals of 1541, the former farming township comprises a series of ruined buildings, trackways, enclosures, and a kiln, surrounded by the vestiges of extensive rig cultivation. This report provides the first archaeological description and analysis of the earthwork and building remains, revealing a complex story of continuity and change stretching back into prehistory. The excavation is casting new light on the activities carried out within the buildings of the township and is beginning to reveal variety in the construction techniques adopted by the farming community. Fieldwork at Olistadh will continue next year and what follows represents an interim report only.

1. Introduction

The Isle of Islay is located close to the Scottish mainland, no more than 25 miles from Ireland, on the western 'sea road' of Britain. The archaeological fieldwork reported here was undertaken as part of the *Inhabiting the Inner Hebrides Project* (initiated in 2022)*, a three-year research project aimed at shedding new light on medieval and later rural settlement practices on this historically important Hebridean island. A key objective was to improve understanding of reuse and continuity of occupation at sites spanning the medieval and later periods. The fieldwork also formed a component of the University of Reading's Archaeological Field School.
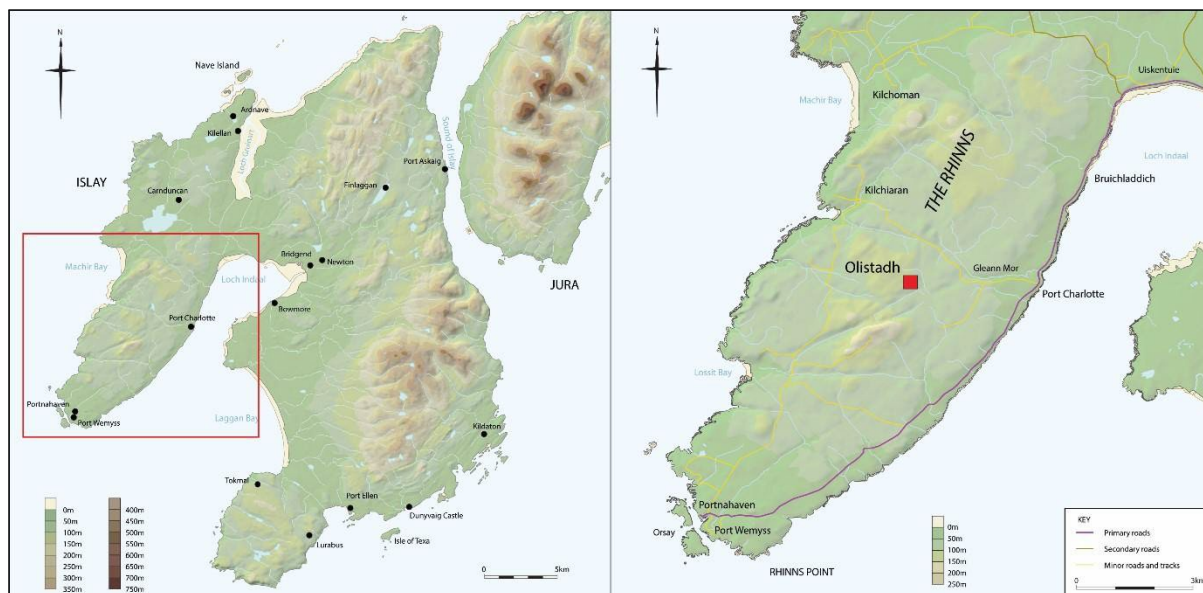

Figure 1: Location map (Illustration: Elaine Jamieson)

Olistadh is located in the Rhinns of Islay, 3.2km to the west of Port Charlotte, sitting within rough ground on a prominent southeast-facing spur below Cnoc Breac Olistadh (NR 21849 58376) (Figure 1). The site is positioned at a height of around 110m above OD and commands far-reaching views out over Loch Indaal and across to the Paps of Jura. The former farming township comprises a series of ruined buildings, trackways, enclosures, and a kiln, surrounded by the vestiges of extensive rig cultivation. The buildings of the township are grouped around a natural rocky mound where a track running south from Gearach meets an east to west route linking the township of Tormisdale and the now abandoned farmstead of Gart na Lacha. A series of springs rise to the west of Olistadh, the water converging and separating the main focus of settlement from a further enclosure and structure not recorded during this season of fieldwork but which presumably formed part of Olistadh township. At the eastern edge of the settlement a stone slab with cup and ring motifs was discovered during initial reconnaissance work in 2022 (NR 21944 58353). Comprising a group of plain cup-marks and a cup with a single ring, these enigmatic motifs signal a phase of prehistoric activity at the site and mark Olistadh as a place with long-standing cultural significance.

2. Brief settlement history

A group of at least eight prehistoric hut circles was identified a little over 200m southwest of the township during the recent survey work (centred on NR 21697 58014). The largest hut is defined by a level sub-circular platform measuring 9.5m in diameter with a substantial bank standing approximately 0.4m high on its north-western side and an entrance to the east. The bank appears to be composed of earth and small stones, and a rock-cut groove 0.15m deep could be traced following its inner edge. This new evidence reveals a long history of occupation and settlement along the slopes of Cnoc Breac Olistadh, with a close association between prehistoric and later settlement activity well documented from elsewhere on Islay (RCAHMS 1984).

The Old Norse *staðir* element of the Olistadh place-name suggests that the medieval farming unit may have its origins in the initial Scandinavian colonisation of Islay in the 9th century (Caldwell 2008, 140). However,

although up to 40% of the island's place-names derive from Old Norse and seven Viking burials are known from the island, there has been no definitive archaeological evidence for Viking Age settlement identified on Islay (Macniven 2015; RCAHMS 1984). We therefore know virtually nothing about Norse architectural traditions on the island or the impact of Viking Age colonisation on the region's rural communities.

A settlement at Olistadh is first documented in the crown rentals of 1541, and throughout the 17th century Olistadh was a mixed farming unit with rental payments broken down into various elements paid in kind, including oxen or cows, sheep and lambs, hens, geese, cheese and quantities of oatmeal. Described as a "good convenient tenement" in the rentals of 1722, Olistadh was listed as an 'auchten part' or eighth land, reflecting a system of land tenure introduced to Islay in the 16th century (Lamont 1959-60, 182). The holding was set along with Carnglassansy to Alan McLean in 1741, who may have let out part of his lands to sub-tenants and collected the rents (Smith 1895, 502-3, 539 & 558).

Niel McCaffer held the tenancy of Olistadh in 1811, with widow McCaffer noted as "deeply in arrears" in the rentals of 1828 when three other tenants were also recorded as having holdings in the township. This would suggest Olistadh was being let directly to multiple tenants at this time, and by 1836 the number of tenants recorded on the rentals had increased to five. This change may have been a response to social and demographic developments on Islay, with the island's population expanding almost threefold between the mid-18th and the mid-19th centuries (Caldwell 2008, 119). The first half of the 19th century also witnessed the foundation of the coastal settlement of Port Charlotte located a little over three 3km to the east of Olistadh, with people from the surrounding townships encouraged to move into the new village. Parish records indicate Neil Mc(?) and Mary McLellan were living at Olistadh in 1845 when their daughter Ann was baptised at the church in Kilchoman, the holding final cleared of tenants shortly after in 1851.

The township of Olistadh is depicted on Stephen MacDougall's map of the Island of Islay (1749-51), the earliest to show the relative location and boundaries of its farm districts (Figure 2). Olistadh is also shown on George Langlands map of Argyllshire printed in 1801, although the scale of the map doesn't allow for the depiction of individual buildings. Four structures and an enclosure were mapped at Olistadh by the Ordnance Survey in c. 1867-1875 for their One-Inch map (*Bowmore*, Sheet 19 1885), with the buildings depicted as unroofed and the township abandoned. By 1878 cartographic evidence indicates a sheepfold and shepherds' cottage had been constructed at the site and marks the holding's conversion to sheep-farming, a common aspect of agricultural Improvement on the hill country of Islay from the mid-19th century (*Argyllshire, Sheet CCXVIII 1882;* Caldwell 2011, 86).

Figure 2. Detail from Stephen MacDougall's map of the Island of Islay showing the farming district of Olistadh. (Photograph: Elaine Jamieson)

3. Summary of survey results

A detailed archaeological survey of the standing buildings and well-preserved earthwork remains at Olistadh was undertaken by the first two authors and students from the University of Reading between 14th June and 7th July 2022. The site was surveyed at 1:500 scale using a combination of Leica GS18 differential Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) and Leica TS12 Total Station Theodolite (TST) equipment, completed in the field using graphical survey methods. A photographic survey was undertaken of the upstanding building remains and an architectural assessment carried out to produce a phase plan for each building. The letters in the following description refer to Figure 3.
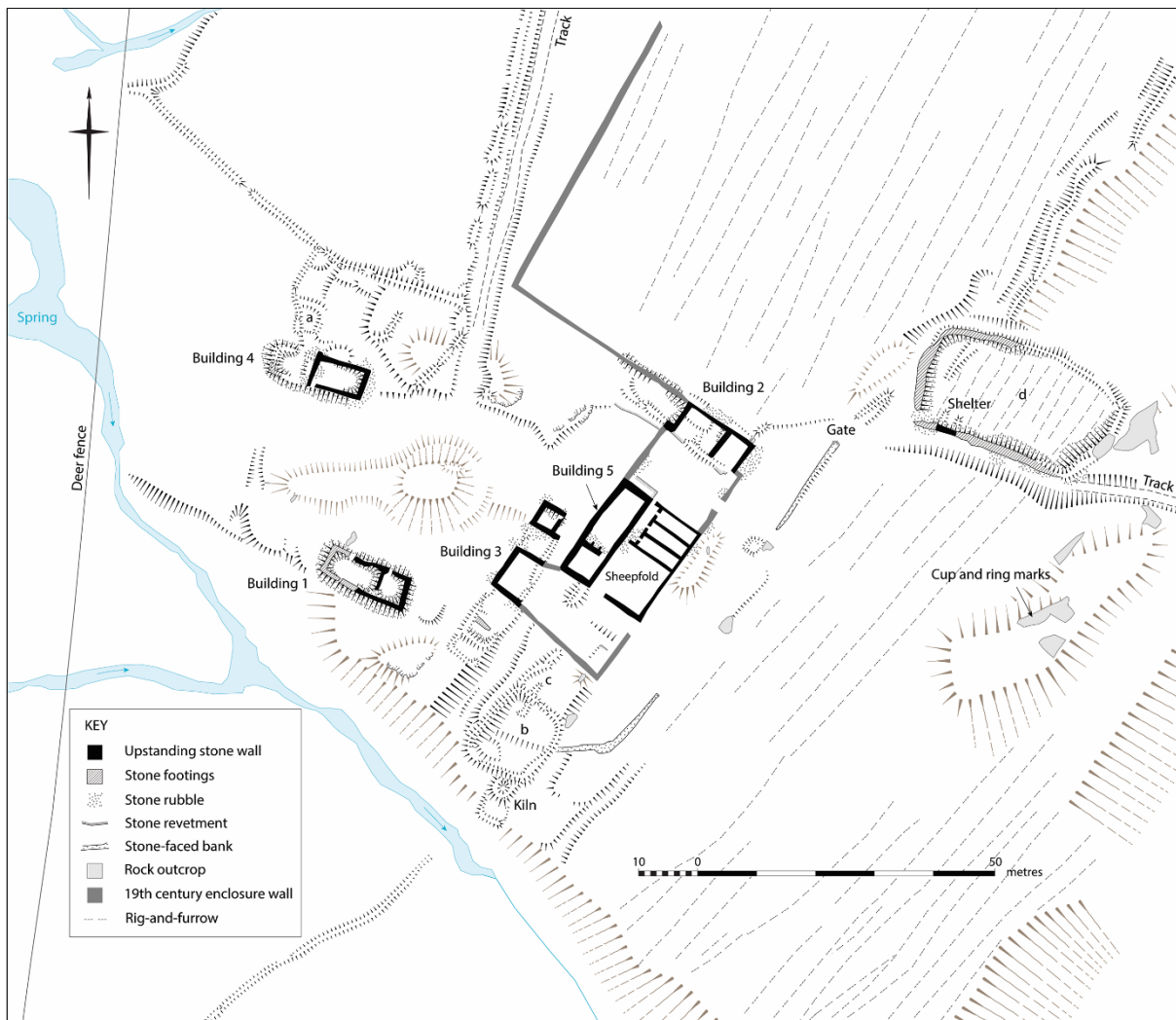

Figure 3. Olistadh Township: analytical earthwork survey plan 1:500 scale (reduced). (Illustration: Elaine Jamieson)

3.1 The buildings

Five main buildings were recorded during field survey, all of which are roofless but with some having side and gable walls standing almost to their original heights. The group of buildings are varied in date and style and represent a mixture of dwelling-houses, byres, barns and other structures. Buildings 1–4 are of drystone or stone-and-earth construction, gable-ended and comprise mainly square angles to the corners. Large boulders, possibly gathered from the surrounding fields, were used either whole or split in wall footings and as long and short quoins.

Buildings 1–4 comprise or incorporate the remains of structures with two compartments, suggestive of traditional houses dating from the 18th or 19th centuries. The best-preserved examples are Buildings 2 and 3

where the two-celled structures measure around 13.2m by 5.8m over walls 0.85m in average thickness, the subdivision possibly denoting a byre and kitchen arrangement. The rubble-built subdivisions in Building 1 and Building 3 are later additions, but the cross-wall in Building 2 would appear to represent an earlier construction phase and may suggest the second room was a later addition (Figure 4). It is possible the inserted stone-built cross walls of Building 1 and Building 3 replaced earlier timber partitions, or alternatively, could indicate an original arrangement represented by an unpartitioned byre and kitchen space.

There is no evidence for gable-end fireplaces in Buildings 1-4, suggesting the dwelling-houses were most probably heated by a centrally placed hearth. Building 3 represents the largest and most complex structure on the site, this linear range farmstead extending to 30.2m and comprising a combination of upstanding walling and grass-covered wall footings. The structure represents a dwelling-house and ancillary buildings set end to
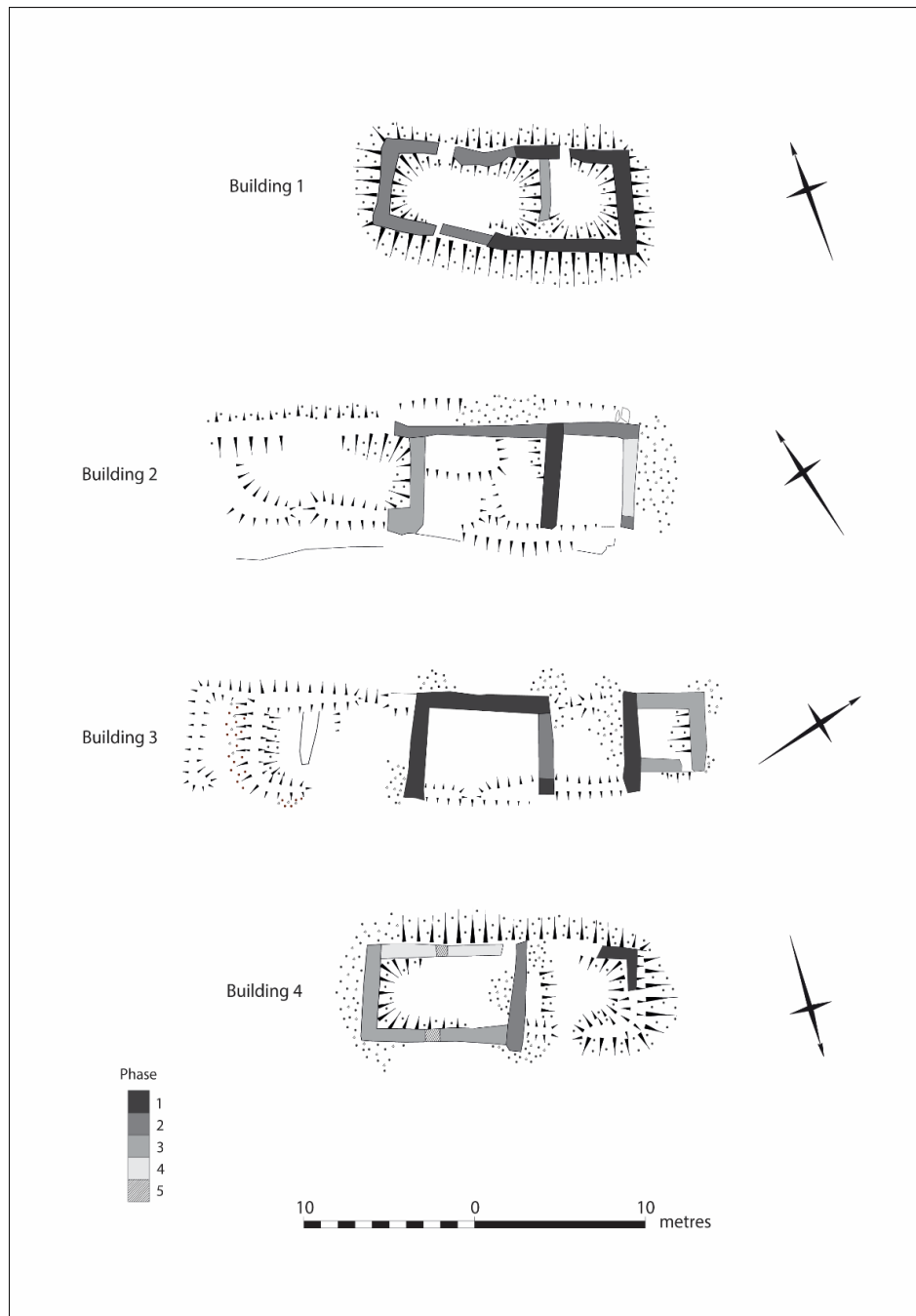

Figure 4: Comparative plans of buildings 1-4 showing the different construction phases visible in the standing fabric. (Illustration: Elaine Jamieson)

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end, with the latest addition possibly a narrower unit at its northern end accessed by an external door on its eastern side. The addition and abandonment of ancillary buildings at both ends of the dwelling may reflect the changing needs and fortunes of its occupants, as well as the shifting nature of the farming economy at Olistadh.

Building 2 is also represented by a linear arrangement of structures defined by earthworks and upstanding walling, the complex extending to around 23.8m in length overall. There has been much stone robbing of the two-celled dwelling-house and some walling has been incorporated into the later 19th-century sheepfold. A drain can be traced running along the back of the house and the position of a former entrance is visible as an earthwork on its south-western side. Stone revetment walling can also be seen protruding through the turf along the length of the front of the building and marks the edge of a sunken yard or the boundary of the main east to west trackway through the township.

The grass-covered earth-and-turf bank which forms the northern end of Building 2 defines a sub-rectangular structure with a rounded gable end, the building measuring approximately 10.8m in overall length. A drystone field wall has compromised the north-eastern side of the structure, with the earthwork remains of a single entrance evident in the long south-western wall. The chronological relationship between the turf structure and the stone-build dwelling-house remains unclear; however, both structures follow the same alignment, are approximately the same width, and have a stone revetment wall to the front. The earth-and-turf composition of the structure distinguishes it from other buildings in the settlement, the construction technique possibly suggesting an earlier origin or a more temporary function.

What is clear from the survey is that all the buildings exhibit much evidence for rebuilding and re-use. Building 4 likely started life as a two-room dwelling, with one of the rooms later abandoned and the remainder rebuilt as a barn or byre measuring 9.5m by 5.3m. The opposing entrances of the barn were later crudely blocked with rubble and the structure possibly repurposed as an animal shelter (Figure 6). The slight earthwork remains of a small building (a), measuring 4.8m by 5.9m, were also identified on the north side of Building 4, the structure clearly pre-dating the bank of an adjoining enclosure and possibly representing a small outbuilding from an earlier phase of occupation. Building 1 was rebuilt at its western end, the refashioned structure constructed on a slightly different alignment and rather clumsily joined to the earlier house by a curving stone wall (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Looking south over Building 1 with Beinn Tart à Mhill and Loch Indaal in the background. (Photograph: Trevor Pearson)

With opposing doors, this new or extended byre and dwelling may add to the evidence for an increasing importance on animal husbandry for the economy of Olistadh during the 19th century.

The move to a livestock-based economy was complete by the end of the century when a sheepfold was constructed at Olistadh. The principal component of the complex was Building 5, a single-storey structure which measures 18.6m by 6.7m over walls up to 1m thick and is interpreted here as a shepherds' cottage. In contrast to the other structures on the site, the coursed-rubble walls of Building 5 display clear evidence for mortared joints with roughly dressed quoins to their corners (Figure 6). It is also the only building with a fireplace, and has a flue built against its internal cross-wall and possibly also in its northern gable (although the latter was obscured by dense vegetation at the time of the survey). This could suggest the main room was divided internally, perhaps by a timber partition or box beds. An enclosed and gated yard and drystone pens for protecting ewes and lambs at lambing time were built adjoining the eastern side of the dwelling-house. Further yards were later added to the north and south, with much of the stonework for the walls robbed from the abandoned structures of the earlier township.

Figure 6: One of the crudely block entrances to Building 4 (left); Mortared joints and roughly dressed quoins of Building 5 (right). (Photographs: Trevor Pearson & Elaine Jamieson)

3.2 Corn-drying kiln, enclosures and boundary features

A corn-drying kiln was recorded set into the terrace above the watercourse on the southern edge of the township. Kilns are a common feature of farming settlements on Islay owing to the dampness of the climate and the short growing season for crops. The kiln is associated with a barn or loading bay on its down-slope side, the rubble footings measuring 4.8m by 5.1m overall and accessed by a single eastern entrance. The kiln-bowl measures c. 2.2m in diameter and has rubble-faced walls with a short lintelled flue visible on the downslope side.

Adjacent to the corn-drying kiln are the vestiges of a small sub-rectangular enclosure (b), measuring 14.2m by 12.1m overall, which likely represents a garden plot and is accessed from its north-eastern side. An earth and stone boundary bank can be traced running northwards from north-western corner of the enclosure, the return of the bank depicted on the Ordnance Survey 25-inch map and now overlain by the rubble wall of the sheepfold enclosure (*Argyllshire and Buteshire, Sheet CCXVIII 1880*). There is also earthwork evidence to suggest a small outbuilding (c) may have sat in the western corner of this open-sided plot. Adjoining these plots to the northwest is the remains of a hollow-way which gave access from the township to the areas of hill pasture on the south-western side of the burn, with a second hollow-way to its southeast possibly similarly used to access the cultivated areas below the head-dyke.

The forestry plantation and the extent of the cultivated area has made it difficult to trace the course of the township's head-dyke. However, a series of sinuous linear boundaries were recorded on the slopes immediately below the settlement stretching along the hillside to the southwest and northeast of the township. There are clear signs that the dyke has been built in sections and pushed out to extend the arable

area, taking what may have been part of the outfield into cultivation. To the northeast of the township the earlier dyke is represented by a spread earth-and-stone bank up to 3m wide which follows the crest of the natural slope; this boundary was later superseded by a bank upslope running parallel to the track from Gearach. Immediately below the township, sections of a stone-face bank were also identified which likely formed part of the original head-dyke. The distinctive appearance of this bank could suggest it had early origins, with orthostats marking the location of a gateway created to accommodate the route of the main east to west trackway.

The lower iteration of the head-dyke to the northeast is partly overlain by a large, sub-rectangular enclosure (d) which is set into the head of a broad natural gulley (Figure 7). The enclosure extends to over 551 square metres in area and is formed by stone-and-turf walls with rounded corners, the boundary also incorporating a natural rock outcrop in its eastern side. The enclosure's southern boundary follows and partly overlies the east to west route through the township, suggesting both the route and the earlier phase of head-dyke pre-date the construction of the enclosure. Built into the enclosure's south wall are the remains of a small gable-ended structure, possibly an animal pen or shelter. The enclosure may have been constructed as a stackyard, although narrow spade-dug rig no more than 14m long and 2.6m wide can be seen in the interior and indicate an episode of small-scale cultivation.

Figure 7: Looking east over enclosure (d) and the main east to west trackway through the township (on the right), with Loch Indaal in the distance. (Photograph: Elaine Jamieson)

3.3 Cultivation remains

Extensive rig cultivation is visible around the township, surviving as relatively straight linear earthworks or grooves on the southeast facing slopes of Cnoc Breac Olistadh. The rigged area covers approximately 20 hectares, most of which is unenclosed and occupies parcels of drier ground demarcated by natural bluffs, gullies and watercourses. Where best preserved, the rig measures around 4m in width and 25m to 100m in length, the length of individual rigs largely reflecting the topography within which they have been fitted, chiefly the pattern of natural geological outcropping. In the cultivated areas below the township the rig shows variation in height and width that may be seen as indicative of multi-period working. Field boundaries are

shown in the higher ground to the north of the township on the Ordnance Survey First Edition 25-inch map (*Argyllshire and Buteshire, Sheet CCXVIII 1880*). These are now under dense coniferous plantation but aerial imagery from 1946 which pre-dates the establishment of the plantation indicates the boundaries enclosed areas of heath pasture, including a large outfield area (NCAP Image No: 000-000-097-284).

A further, detached portion of rig cultivation, extending to no more than 1.5 hectares, is also visible 620m to the southwest of the township on a narrow terrace close to the boundary of the farming district. Two small oval structures sit towards the north-western and north-eastern edges of the rigged area, the buildings defined by roughly built stone-rubble walls which stand no more than 0.7m high. The single-cell structures measure a maximum of 7.1m in length overall and both have single entrances on their long south sides. These structures may represent sheiling-huts, the rig possibly an area of irregularly cultivated hill pasture; alternatively, they may signify a phase of more permanent settlement, either an overflow from Olistadh or the vestiges of a dispersed form of settlement that preceded the nucleated township.

4. Summary of excavation results

Two areas were selected for excavation during the University of Reading field school in 2022, the excavations directed by the third named author. Trench One was positioned over the western end of Building 1 to establish the character of the archaeological remains and to explore the structure's internal layout. Trench Two was located at the north-western end of Building 2 to investigate the curving grass-covered bank noted in the earthwork survey. Four slots were also dug across features in both trenches to test their construction and preservation. Neither trench was fully excavated, and both will be revisited during the 2023 excavation season; what follows represents an interim statement only.

Figure 8: Aerial image showing the remains of Olistadh township, the sheepfold and the location of the 2022 trenches: Trench One (top centre) and Trench Two (bottom left). (Photograph: Sarah Lambert-Gates).

4.1 Trench One

Trench One, measuring approximately 10 x 10m, was located at the western end of Building 1, a well-preserved structure with little in the way of collapsed building rubble and therefore offering a substantial internal area suitable for detailed excavation (Figure 9). The building is set into the natural slope of the hillside above the western watercourse and is clearly adapted to utilise the naturally outcropping bedrock, a practice noted from elsewhere on the site. The structure is raised out of the boggy ground to the south by means of a stone platform set against the southern side of the building, with extra stone support and reinforcement also present at its south-western corner. Removal of the topsoil and rubble outside the footprint of the structure on its northern side revealed a cobbled surface and laid flagged pathway leading up to the stone threshold of the north entrance.

Figure 9: Plan of Trench One. (Illustration: University of Reading)

Inside the building, the rubble was removed by hand and the vegetation and compacted topsoil was excavated down onto two distinct surfaces which were separated by a substantial stone-lined and capped drain [1008]. Situated to the west of the building's opposing entranceways, the drain utilised the underlying bedrock and ran through the building following the natural slope and out via an outlet in its southern wall. The area to the west of the stone-lined drain was a maximum of 1.8m in width and comprised an interleaving deposit of compacted peat overlying a rough mixed earth, clay and stone surface [1015/1016]. This surface was divided into narrow 'compartments' by edgings of small stones and runnels or grooves for drainage, the smallest 'compartment' no more than 0.7m wide. The area to the east of the drain included a surface of flagged paving and clay flooring [1012/1010/1011/1009] incorporating a substantial burnt deposit located roughly centrally within the space [1002].

The excavation would appear to confirm that the western end of Building 1 was rebuilt as a byre-dwelling with opposing doors, the new structure on a slightly different alignment and marginally narrower than the earlier building it adjoins. The pottery, glass, and a variety of iron implements recovered from within the building suggest a date of the early to mid-1850s, indicating the house was possibly abandoned around the same time the township was cleared.

4.2 Trench Two

Trench Two measured 4.25 x 6.75m and had a 4 x 1m southern extension and a 2 x 1.5m eastern extension (Figure 10). Cleaning of deposits beneath the turf and topsoil revealed at least three separate phases of construction activity in this area. The earliest was represented by a turf bank (2004) running northwest to south-eastern across the trench, the south-eastern extent of which would appear to have been cut into and rebuilt or extended by the addition of a stone-faced earthen bank [2003]. The turf bank consists of a light green-yellow degraded sandy peat (turf), 0.5m wide at its south-eastern end and widening to 2.8m at the northwest where it meets the trench edge. This deposit was partially excavated within Slot Four, where it had a depth of 0.3m and consisted of degraded turf blocks approximately 0.2 x 0.1m in size. The feature made use of the natural topography and outcropping rock, with the greater width to the northwest likely due to slumping of the turf deposits.
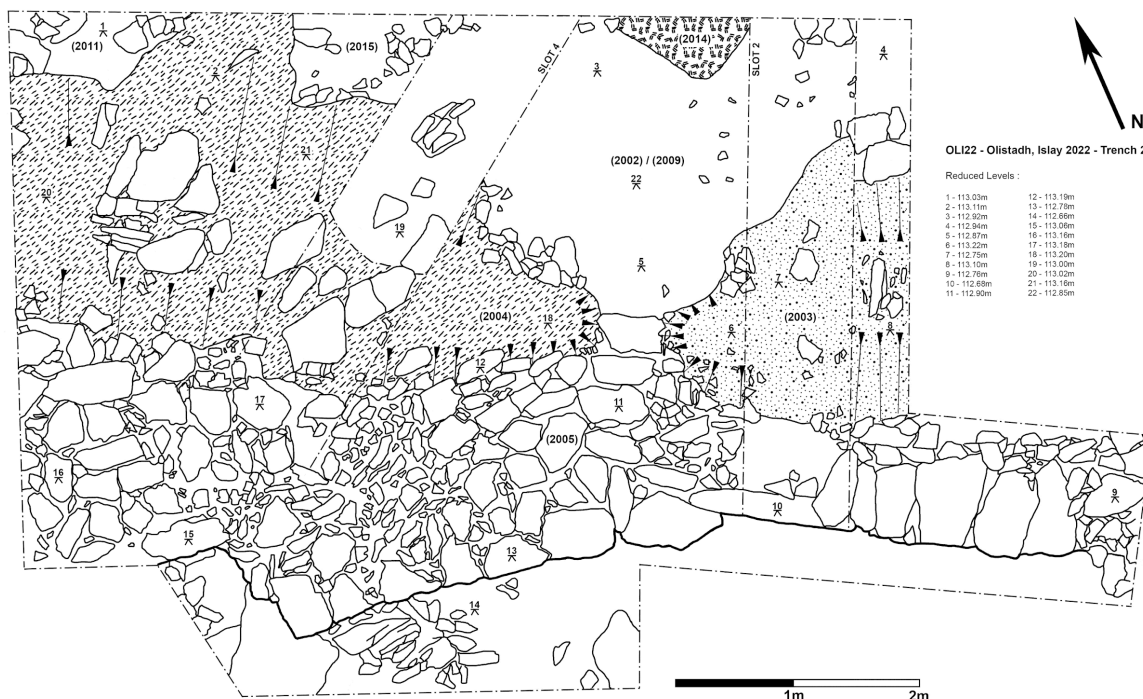

Figure 10: Plan of Trench Two. (Illustration: University of Reading)

The stone-faced earthen bank [2003] consists of a low deposit of compacted light brown-orange sandy silt, 0.5m wide at the north-western extent and widening to 2.25m at the southeast, the deposit having a minimum depth of 0.35m in Slot Two. No dating evidence was recovered from the bank and any possible 'internal' deposits to the northeast have been heavily disturbed, perhaps by the construction and use of Building 2. There is some evidence that five large flat stones surviving in this area may once have been part of a paved surface, with glazed pottery and glass fragments recovered from this context. Slight evidence of burning [2011 and 2015] and the recovery of charred pottery (not glazed) may also suggest some domestic activity.

Abutting the south-western side of the banks and post-dating them, was an expanse of well-constructed stone pavement, a small section of which was excavated within Slot Two. This surface forms a raised platform overlooking an area of boggy ground thought to represent a sunken yard or a trackway. Stone steps or flags were uncovered leading from the stone pavement to bisect the earthen bank, this pathway continuing north-eastwards by way of a further two stone slabs (now excavated). Broadly in alignment with the stone steps, a mid-orange-yellow clay deposit [2014] was exposed at the north-eastern edge of the trench and may be associated with the remnants of a late surface. Glazed pottery recovered from under the upper course of stones suggests this is the latest feature excavated within the trench, dating from the 18th or 19th century.

5. Conclusion

Overall, results from the first year of archaeological work at Olistadh have proved immensely promising. The new landscape survey has exposed longevity in the occupation story, revealing evidence for habitation and cultural activity at Olistadh stretching back into prehistory. It has also raised the prospect of greater complexity within the pre-Improvement settlement model, with evidence hinting at a more dispersed settlement pattern. The detailed survey work is beginning to untangle the complex and ever-changing nature of the township, where individual house-sites could be abandoned and reoccupied and their function changed over time. The assessment of the standing fabric of the buildings has revealed a restructuring of space within the dwelling houses, where the partitioning of rooms may suggest a period of increased social division within the household. All this reveals enormous fluidity within the settlement and reflects longer term changes driven by a range of mutable social and economic processes.

In addition, the excavation is starting to cast new light on the activities carried out within the buildings of the township, demonstrating that byre-dwellings with opposing doors and centrally placed hearths were being constructed and occupied into the mid-19th century. The variety in construction techniques adopted at Olistadh have also been highlighted, including the use of turf and earth for walling in one of the structures. Turf-walled houses have been identified elsewhere on Islay, including at Eilean Mor, Finlaggan, where numerous sub-rectangular buildings with stone-faced earth-and-turf walls were excavated and their hearths dated to between the 13th and 15th centuries (Caldwell 1993, 154; 2010, 48). How long this construction technique continued in use on Islay remains unclear, however, and it will take further work at Olistadh to understand the true nature and significance of the turf and earth walling in Trench Two.

The *Inhabiting the Inner Hebrides* project will continue until 2024, with more survey and excavation work planned on Islay in 2023. It is hoped that the results of this project will continue to contribute to our understanding of the development of the medieval and later settlement pattern on Islay, as well as adding to our knowledge of settlement development along the western seaboard of Scotland.

6. Acknowledgements

7. Bibliography

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