

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF TOLSTA by Dr Mary Macleod

The East Coast of the Isle of Lewis is an area in which little detailed archaeological survey has been carried out. This is certainly true of Tolsta and its environs. Over the years, only two archaeological survey teams have worked in the district, the Royal Commission on the Ancient & Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), which came through in 1913 looking particularly for monuments worth including in the list of Scheduled Ancient Monuments (protected by law), and the Coastal Erosion Assessment team, who came through the area in 1996, looking at the coastal strip. The huge number of new sites found by the Coastal Erosion Assessment (with which I worked) just goes to show the potential of the area; anything that I write about the archaeology of Tolsta at this point in time is based on inadequate knowledge, and may well change in the future.

Having made that point, what do we know about Tolsta, and its background? People have lived in the Outer Hebrides for at least 6 000 years, possibly longer. The earliest settlement sites that have been found in the islands date to around 4 000 BC, the Neolithic, or New Stone Age. These, our early ancestors, were farmers, using stone tools, making pots, keeping cattle, sheep, pigs, and possibly managing herds of deer also. They grew wheat and barley, and harvested wild food, particularly fish & shellfish, nuts (hazel nuts were very important) and berries. They lived in small oval or rectangular houses, some of which were built on islands in lochs. There are two possible such sites in the Tolsta area - one is a crannog (an artificial or partly artificial island) in a loch, now drained, called Loch Osavat, in the centre of the township. The other is in Loch Beinn Tairbeairt. Such sites could be occupied for hundreds, or even thousands of years, and it is possible that these two sites may have first been occupied in the Neolithic. However, as yet we do not have any evidence of the dates during which they were used, as there are no finds from the sites.

Neolithic people built large communal burial cairns, which were used time and time again, and were probably places of worship and religious significance as well as burial places. There are a number of such sites in the islands, such as Barpa Langais in North Uist. They also raised standing stones, such as the stones at Calanais. If people were living in Tolsta at this time, we would expect to find at least one burial cairn, and perhaps a standing stone, somewhere in the area.

The population of the islands appears to have stayed and developed throughout the following four to five thousand years. Although buildings, pottery, and tools changed, with the introduction of metals, the clearance of woodlands and increased use of stone for building, and the new fashions

coming from the mainland, and possibly moving back to the mainland from the islands, the population probably stayed the same.

Buildings became more and more massive up to the years around 0 BC/AD. The ultimate expression of this fashion was the broch, the huge Iron Age towers built all over the North & West of Scotland, which may possibly have developed in the Western Isles. As yet we don't know of a broch in the Tolsta area, but there may have been one, and there certainly would have been roundhouses, the circular stone houses in which most people lived.

Around the 6th century AD, the islands began gradually to convert to Christianity. As one would expect, when people converted, they built places of worship in their settlements, and this means that the early churches of the islands, such as that at Cladh Mhicheil, are typically built on top of, or very near Iron Age archaeological remains. Many chapels and churches date back to this early time, and have continued to be used and rebuilt since then.

The name, Tolstadh, reflects the arrival of the Norse people in the islands around about AD 800. The last part of the name, *-stadh*, is from the Old Norse word *sta_ir*, which means 'farm'. The first part is a contraction of a personal name, perhaps Thorkell. Although the name of the township must have changed at this time, many archaeologists believe that the Norse who settled in the Hebrides mixed with the existing population. One of the reasons for believing this is that we know that many of the first generation of pagan Norse in the islands converted to Christianity as a result of being exposed to it here, and they took the new religion back to Scandinavia, and onwards to Iceland. The Western Isles were a part of Norway for nearly 500 years.

By the end of the 13th century AD, the islands had once again become a part of Scotland, and the ruling power in Lewis was the Lordship of the Isles. It is probably to this period that the fortified stac of Caisteal a'Mhorair belongs. It is one of a series of small castles on stacs and islands on the coasts of the Hebrides. We don't know very much about them, but recent excavations at the large site of Dun Eistean, further up the coast, in Ness, have shown that there was a small rectangular tower on this stac, with other buildings and an artificial loch. There is no room for such a large complex on the stac at Gearraidh, but there may have been other buildings on the adjacent headland.

All the evidence that we have suggests that the Tolsta area has been occupied for a long time, and would benefit from more detailed archaeological survey and research. A walk with the Comann Eachdraidh on 20th July this year, on a beautifully sunny day, showed how much can be seen in the landscape around North Tolsta, particularly along the coastline. It also proved how

much the members of the society can tell the archaeologists about sites in the area, with stories and names for the sites coming thick and fast. Of particular interest was the grassy hollow, Slag an t-Searmoin, where preaching took place during the Reformation – this is the type of site that archaeologists cannot hope to identify alone, as the feature is a natural one, but used for crucially important gatherings in the history of the township. I hope that there will be possibilities in the future to encourage the Comann Eachdraidh and archaeologists to work together to learn more about the history and archaeology of the district.

It was all smiles before Dr Mary Macleod and Donald Murray took this group on an informative tour of the Machair and the Ard.

From left to right Donald Macleod of No. 25, Rhoda Murray of No.22, John and Rita Macleod of Firhill, Jenny Macleod of No.25, Dr Mary Macleod, Donald Murray of No.22, Heather Beck, Inverness, Margaret Murray of No.49, Calum Iain Maciver of No.79, Shona McKean formerly of 24b, Nina Moir of No.54, and Kenneth Beck of Inverness (Mac Anna Choinnich Red).

Kneeling at the front Ciorstaidh and Angus Maciver of No.79, Kirsty and Fraser McKean of No.24b and Ruairaidh Moir of No.54.

The photograph was taken on the site of Teampull Mhicheil (St Michael's Temple or Chapel) in the North East corner of the cemetery. The original Church graveyard (Reidhlig Mhicheil) was round the Teampull and is our present cemetery. This was the centre of the Ancient village of Tolsta and the hillock below the cemetery called Cnoc na Ceardaich (The Smithy) is an example of a site used by different peoples for centuries and thus creating the hillock. This area from Gil Tholastaidh bho Thuath to Gil Tholastaidh bho older villagers always referred to Dheas as 'Am Baile' although we now refer to the area as 'Na Machraichean'