

PREFACE

Physical Background

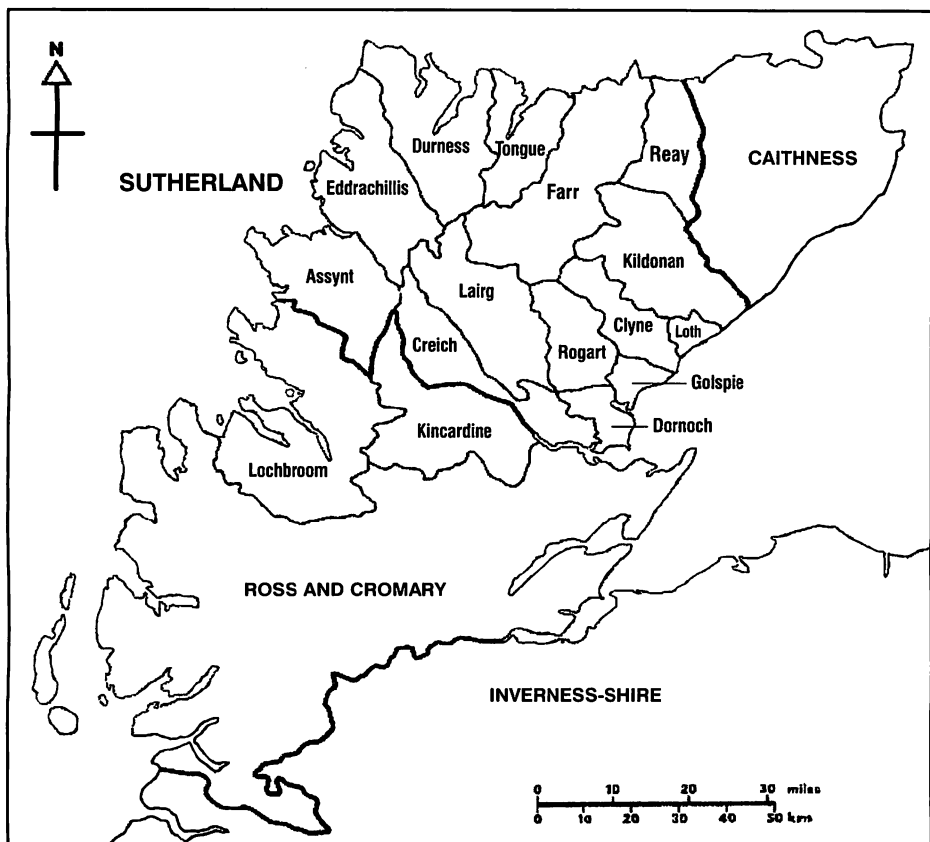
West and south of lowland Caithness, the northern landmass is characterised by long winding valleys penetrating a core of mountains and moorland. The lower reaches of these straths generally terminate in substantial sea lochs or bays; middle and upper reaches frequently accommodate considerable expanses of freshwater; whilst relatively low land routes between the heads of the valleys have provided access and communication from earliest times.

Geologically, much of the area, particularly west of Loch Eriboll, is founded on unrelenting Lewisian gneiss, partly overlain with Torridonian sandstones, quartzite and sedimentary rocks laid down when a vast ocean covered what is now dry land. Folds, faults and granite intrusions interweave, with sedimentary strata further east overriding those to the west to give the Moine thrust – characterised by that bleak, eponymous expanse of moorland separating the Kyle of Tongue from Loch Eriboll. These low and boggy upland plateaux are punctuated by relatively isolated mountain massifs and have been heavily eroded by the force of wind, water and particularly glaciation. For it was glaciers that smoothed and striated the surface of the rocks and carved out the corries high up on such mountains as Ben Loyal, Ben Hope and Ben Klibreck; and it was glaciers that gouged out the deep troughs of lower Strath Naver, Loch Loyal and Loch Eriboll. It was the retreating glaciers, moreover, that deposited terminal moraines and large erratic boulders, and created moraine-dammed lochs; and it was meltwater that burst through to give the steep-sided gorges of the Armadale, Kirtomy and Swordly Burns. In addition, as the ice-caps melted, and their pressure on the landmass lessened, this landmass rose and one-time shorelines became the raised beaches and stranded sea cliffs around the mouths of the Borgeie and the Naver rivers, at Bettyhill's Clachan Rock and elsewhere.

Heavy rainfall, generally low temperatures and but modest sunshine helped create extensive peat bogs and rough moorland that would provide good grazing. They also tended to restrict cultivation and settlement either to fluvio-glacial deposits and river-cut terraces in the lower valleys of such as Strath Halladale, Strath Naver, the Kyle of Tongue and Strath Dionard, or to a scatter of coastal locations often associated with fine sandy beaches or machair, or (in the case of Durness) a rare band of limestone.

Prehistoric Settlers

There is little to show for the earliest settlers beyond the occasional standing stone or cup-and-ring mark. The purpose of these monuments remains unclear: standing stones were possibly boundary or grave markers, whilst pecked circular hollows and rings such as those near Lochan Hakel, between



Map of Sutherland Parishes.

Ribigill and the Kyle of Tongue, may just conceivably have been some kind of decorative representation of a man-made landscape. By contrast, a considerable number of chambered burial cairns survive. These may be round, long or rectangular; they can also be oval, heel-shaped or with projecting corners or 'horns' suggesting forecourts. Re-used over considerable periods of time during the 4th/3rd millennia BC, there are significant examples at Skelpick, Skail and Coille na Borgie in Strathnaver.

Two or three thousands years separate these burial cairns from the fortified sites of the 1st millennium BC/1st millennium AD. Fortification is evidence of increasingly unsettled times, and hill-forts often betray several defensive 'rings'. In Strathnaver, such forts are commonly found on coastal headlands, where ditches and ramparts were engineered to cut off the landward side and provide protection for houses built within the enclosure –

Dun Mhairtein (Baligill), An Tornaigh Bhuidhe (Portskerra) and Seanachaisteal (Durness). Where such forts were small and built of stone, they are generally referred to as duns (Gaelic *dun*, a fort, fortified hill) – as at Durness, Loch Borrallie and Borgie.

Brochs, however, were altogether more elaborate and sophisticated in their architecture, and probably constructed by specialist builders. Characteristically tall, and accessed by a single low narrow entrance, they comprised massively thick double walls – within which were stairs, galleries and chambers, including guard rooms flanking the entrance. Brochs, like duns, probably had thatched roofs to give shelter to activities taking place within the internal circular courtyard; they might also boast external buildings, abandoned when under attack. Examples survive beside the Armadale Burn, above Skelpick and at Grummore (Strath Naver), on Dun na Maigh (at the head of the Kyle of Tongue), at Dun Dornaigil/Dornadilla (south of Loch Hope) and at Clachtoll (Stoer).

Numerous hut circles or house sites, sometimes with nearby enclosures and field systems, can be of much the same date (although some may be much older, and others younger). So also are souterrains or earth-houses – slightly curved underground passages which were most likely used as storage chambers and approached from a house above. That so many hut circles and a number of souterrains have been found beyond the hill-dykes of later townships, suggests that at one time there were likely much greater numbers on lower land, swept away by subsequent ploughing. In other words, those surviving tend to confirm a one-time more attractive climate that encouraged settlement at a higher altitude. These were the ordinary, everyday farms and houses of those who, in times of trouble, would presumably retreat to their fortified duns and brochs.

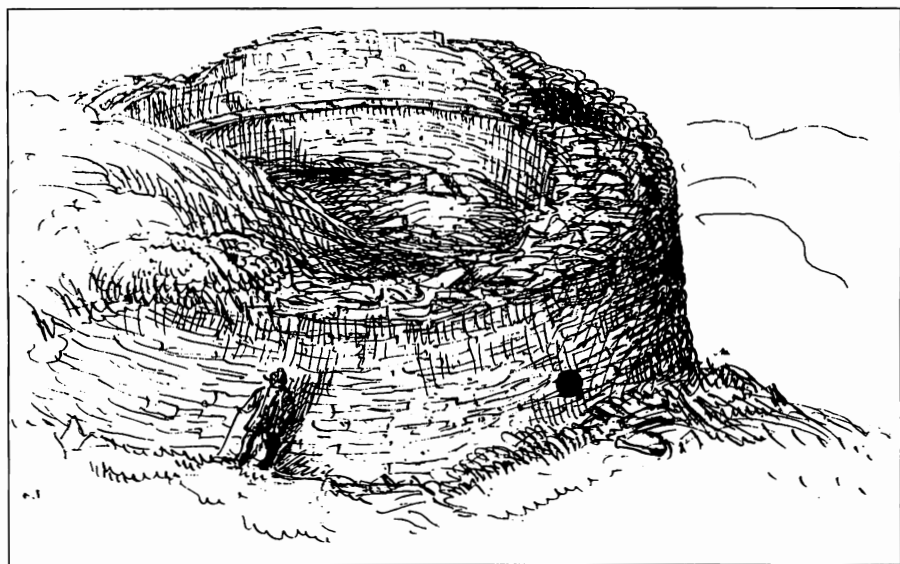
In *The Province of Strathnaver*, ‘**Pre-Medieval Times**’ offers two papers dealing with aspects of this prehistoric period. One traces environmental change through analyses of pollens and grains up to 12,000 years old; the other examines the underground earth-houses or souterrains in considerable detail, exploring their structure, functions and distribution across Sutherland.

Emerging Medieval Communities

It was the descendants and successors of these early peoples who were to become known as ‘Picts’ from around 300 AD – a name given them by others, rather than by themselves. Other than for a scatter of place-names and metalwork hoards, the main surviving evidence for the Picts lies in their carved stones. In general, Pictish stones are divided into three groups or classes – symbol stones without Christian symbols (probably later 7th - mid 8th century); stones with Pictish and Christian symbols (later 8th - 9th century); and cross-slabs with no Pictish symbols (maybe later 8th - 10th century). Though many have since been moved, the original locations of



Broch at Baile Mhargait, west side of River Naver, Bettyhill. Sketches by
J. Horsburgh, 1867.



those in the first group, where known, are thought to correlate – at least in part – with the distribution of *pit* names and hill-forts: unsurprisingly, stones in the two later groups are often found in close association with ecclesiastical sites. Pictish stones from Sutherland and neighbouring Caithness include a symbol stone from Sandside and cross-slabs from Farr and Reay – as well as from Golspie, where there is a remarkable series of Class 1 stones. There is little agreement as to the significance of either the symbols or the stones' original locations, but they may have been territorial markers, or perhaps a permanent record of battles, marriages or other events or alliances. Then there are such as the Grumbeg cross-slabs from the shores of Loch Naver – one of which, albeit more roughly executed, shows similarities with the Isle Martin cross-slab, Clach Fear Eilean-Mhàirtein, in Lochbroom. For at some point following the union of the Picts and the Scots ca 843 AD, cross-slabs stop being 'Pictish' and become part of the legacy of the wider, Gaelic-speaking, early Celtic church in the north – part of a tradition that has left early monastic sites and place-names incorporating such elements as *annaid* and *cill*.

The Picts are referred to but obliquely in *The Province of Strathnaver*, as part of the search for '**The Medieval Province**'. In an attempt to help establish the area's extent and character, it is this section that opens the book. There are three interrelating contributions: a study of the origins and



Pictish symbol stones at Sandside, Caithness, 1991 (left) and Golspie, 1987.





Pictish cross-slabs at Reay (left) and Clachan, Bettyhill. 1991.

Cross-slabs from Grumbeg, Strathnaver, 1991. The carving on the right bears some resemblance to that on Isle Martin, Loch Broom.



evolution of the territory during Norse and immediately post-Norse times, an analysis of a Viking burial at Durness, and an exploration of Norse place-names along the north Sutherland coast and its straths. The Norse term for the Pentland Firth, *Pettalands-fjörðr*, helps confirm an indigenous tribal group prior to the arrival of both Norse and Gaelic speakers, whilst *Katanes*, initially applied to Duncansby Head, acknowledges this as the ness or promontory of the 'Catti'. This pre-Norse, pre-Gaelic-speaking people seems to have inhabited an area roughly similar to modern Caithness and Sutherland. The lands south of the Ord of Caithness were later designated *Suðrland* by the Norse (the southern part of *Katanes*), whilst that area west of lowland Caithness was referred to in the sagas as the 'Dales' of Caithness (*Dalir*). The contributors argue that the 'province' of Strathnaver likely equates with these 'dales', and should be seen as part of the earldom lands of Caithness. To the descendants of the incoming Gaelic speakers, however, Irish Scots who had penetrated north up the west coast and the Great Glen from their Dalriadic base, *Cataibh* continued to describe those one-time Pictish territories outwith the original *Katanes*. And it was only in much later times that the name 'Sutherland' spread to encompass the 'county' of the same name, following consolidation of their extended territories by the earls of Sutherland. The name, in other words, followed the family.

Post-Medieval Life and Society

As 'Strathnaver' emerges from the Norse and Celto-Norse periods, certain powerful interests came to the fore – notably the bishops of Caithness, the earls of Caithness, the earls of Sutherland and the Mackays. There is scant surviving evidence in the landscape for their early presence, however, particularly in the north and the west. Virtually nothing remains of modest castles, essentially tower houses, at Balnakeil and Borge – the latter a Mackay stronghold destroyed in 1556. And as for Caisteal Bharraich, overlooking Kirkiboll and the Kyle of Tongue, it has been associated variously with the 'Beruvik' of *Orkneyinga Saga*, with the bishops of Caithness (en route from their castle at Scrabster to their house and lands at Balnakeil), and with Angus Dubh Mackay – who may conceivably have built or rebuilt it ca 1420 following the Lordship charter of 1415.

The policies, influence and inter-relationships of these powerful interests, particularly the Mackays and the Sutherlands, dominate much of the ensuing centuries. With the help of written accounts by travellers and ministers, landowners and improvers, however, as well as an increasingly wide range of government, estate and other formal documents, it becomes possible to supplement the evidence of archaeology, place-names and early charters, and to explore not just the lives and lifestyles of these families, but those also of the ordinary people.

The underlying thread is of fundamental change. Particularly from the 18th century, there was increasingly less emphasis on a sense of mutual

responsibility and inter-dependence. And no longer was the focus on working in harmony with the environment and living, as it were, through plants or animals – where domestic animals were nurtured for their multi-purpose role as providers of energy, food and all manner of other useful things around the farm. Instead, animals and crops became end-products whose financial value was to be maximised by the increasingly intensive use of land and sea.

This was the philosophical framework within which sub-tenants, cottars, fishermen and kelpworkers came also to be seen primarily as wealth-creators for the landowners – resources to be maximised. If insufficient wealth were being created, then activities and practices had to be changed. In practical terms, this led to the removal of vast areas of hill-land and infield from community use and to the final disintegration of the old order. Local populations were evicted and relocated on marginal coastal lands; numbers of livestock were increased beyond any reasonable sustainable limit; new intensive sheep farms, once they became less profitable, were converted to sporting deer forests; new, mainly coastal holdings were established and further subdivided as population growth was encouraged; sub-tenants and cottars were obliged to neglect the seasonal work upon which their survival depended in order to maximise cash crops of fish and kelp. And when these new industries contracted or collapsed, emigration was used as a means of solving the problem of an expanded, impoverished and periodically starving population. For by the early 19th century, if not earlier, Highland communities in the north and west were no longer self-supporting in any balanced sense. The products of so much of their labour were exploited and exported by others; the modest income they received was returned in large part to landowners in the form of higher rents; and deprived of the multiple resources of their erstwhile lands, ordinary people became increasingly dependent upon basic subsistence strategies. Some landowners sought to stand by and help their tenants in times of want, and often suffered financially as a result, but they were increasingly a minority and most were eventually replaced by proprietors and factors whose backgrounds were more attuned to the maximisation of financial returns than to any obvious notion of mutual support.

Change of some kind had been inevitable. Economic systems were changing throughout Scotland, England and beyond, and the Highlands and Islands could not remain sheltered. Rather was it partly the nature of that change, but more particularly the way in which change was carried out, that gave rise to so much hardship, so much anger and so much bitterness.

The visible results of these changes remain scattered across the landscape – the fertile straths remain empty, punctuated by an occasional mains farm, shepherd's house or shooting lodge; the foundations of cleared townships are grazed by sheep or buried beneath forestry. Along with Patrick Sellar's early 19th-century house at Syre (Strath Naver), the likes of earlier Rossal or Grumbeg are ghostly reminders of landscapes once populated with thriving, broadly self-sufficient communities. Meantime, the once-

congested, mainly coastal and linear post-clearance holdings (Laid is a good example, beside Loch Eriboll), are all-but abandoned nowadays as actively-crofted units, although they may well be grazed, ironically, by the crofters' sheep. The land was too poor, the holdings too small, and supplementary industries too precarious to encourage a dislocated population to survive there once more attractive opportunities had opened up in the towns, the Lowlands, England or further afield. Today's landscape is littered with the evidence of former croft houses, many now converted into second homes or holiday cottages; and the little harbours that were supposed to nurture the brave new fishing industries lie largely deserted – victims of uncertain or over-fished shoals, larger boats and the hazardous currents and seaways that were to be marked by lighthouses at Cape Wrath (1828), Stoer (1870) and Strathy Point (1958). Today, the likes of Port Vasgo and Talmine, Skullomie and Skerray, Portskerra and Strathy (along with such west coast jetties as Fanagmore or Taret) shelter at best a handful of small lobster, crab or prawn fishing boats. Nineteenth century ice-houses for salmon lie empty at Bettyhill and Bighouse, and new uses have been sought for fishery piers, houses and storehouses at Rispond (18th century) and Badcall Bay (19th-century). Meanwhile, long-abandoned ferry piers at Portnancon mark the most effective route to the other side of Loch Eriboll (to Heilam), prior to the building of a longer, tortuous, but more reliable road.

As for the more fertile agricultural land, improvements were pursued by landowners and their principal tenants after the manner of the Lowlands. The land was reorganised geometrically into large rectangular and enclosed fields, and drained; lime kilns (as at Ard Neackie and Baligill), along with increased amounts of dung and seaweed, provided the wherewithal to sweeten the soil and produce more luxuriant crops – not just barley and oats, but sown grasses and turnips better to keep and fatten cash-crop livestock. Substantial lairds' houses, sometimes successors to earlier castles, were either built, rebuilt or enlarged at Scourie, Balnakeil, Melness, Tongue and Bighouse; elaborate 19th-century steadings in lowland style (as at Tongue, Melness and Scourie) accommodated up-to-date agricultural machinery and in-wintered cattle; estate mills ground the grain (though small horizontal mills continued to be used by the small tenants in townships such as Kirtomy); and new roads and bridges helped improve communications both between individual valleys and with the south and east. By way of example, after the Earl of Sutherland acquired the Reay estate in 1829, he proceeded to link his old and new lands with a road over the Moine; and Moin House [*sic*] was built in 1830 as a refuge, approximately halfway across that bleak and inhospitable moor.

Finally, ecclesiastical evidence. Little survives from the medieval period, though at Crosskirk, a few miles east of Reay, the chancelled ruins of St Mary's Chapel, probably 12th century, echo the architecture of Northern Isles rather than Highland churches, and reflect the influence of the Orkney earldom. Otherwise, there had been medieval churches at Reay, Farr and Durness, with chapels in Strath Halladale, Strath Naver and at Kirkiboll.



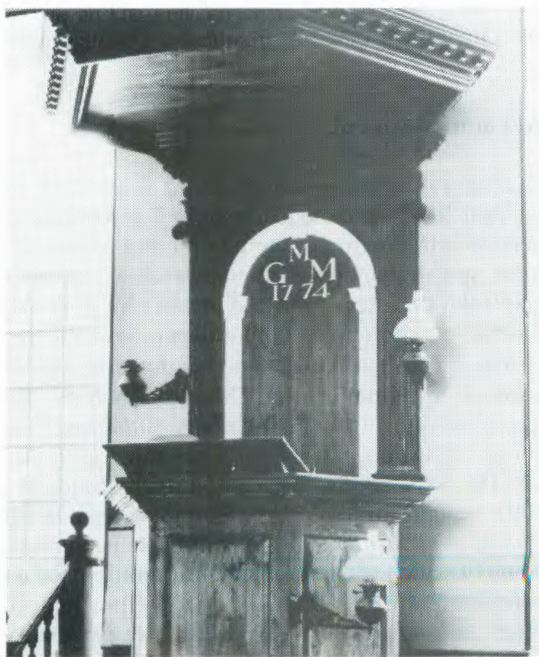
Harbour at Port Skerra, 1974.

Lime kilns at Ard Neackie, Loch Eriboll, close by Heilam, the former ferry-point opposite Portnancon, 1983.





Steading at Tongue mains farm, 1974.



Late 18th century pulpit,
Farr Church, Bettyhill,
1985.

Post-Reformation churches include Balnakeil (Durness), built 1619, later extended, now roofless, but housing a fine 1619 armorial as well as the 1623 grave slab of Duncan MacMorrach. And a further 17th-century church, somewhat altered, survives at Tongue. A good, late 18th-century church survives at Bettyhill (now the Strathnaver Museum); there are 19th-century Parliamentary churches at Strathy (1828), Kinlochbervie (1829) and Stoer (1829), a post 1843 Disruption church at Strathy (ca 1845), and late 19th/early 20th-century 'tin' (corrugated iron) churches at Syre and Torrisdale. This contrasting, and far from comprehensive array of church buildings betrays in part the growing need by the 19th-century to provide more conveniently situated places of worship for an increased population spread across a vast and inhospitable landmass; it also helps document the growing disenchantment with the established church and its ministers that accompanied the breakdown in relations between landowners and tenants as clearances intensified.

This then is the backdrop against which other contributors tease out a picture of everyday life in the later period. **'The Post-Medieval Province'** continues the story of land-ownership, family feuding and the influence of the church. It also focuses on buildings, whether the excavation of an 18th/19th-century farmhouse near Lairg or architectural surveys of the 'big hooes' of Bighouse at the mouth of Strath Halladale; it explores 20th-century literary treatment of the clearances in the work of Neil Gunn, Fionn MacColla and Iain Crichton Smith; it delves into the collection and uses of seaweed around Loch Laxford and Badcall; and it takes a look at the survival of traditional healing following the collapse of the clans and the eclipse of such hereditary clan physicians as Fearchar Lighiche of Melness.

Acknowledgement

Several valuable collections about Sutherland have been published during the past 20 years. Donald Omand's *The Sutherland Book* (1982) gives a good general introduction to the natural and historical environment, and includes more specific studies of themes such as agriculture, fisheries, place-names and folklore. It was followed in 1987 by Alex. Morrison's *North Sutherland Studies* – a short collection of papers from the Scottish Vernacular Buildings Group, with a particular focus on domestic buildings and settlement history around Strathnaver and Skerry before and after the Clearances. Subsequently, Elizabeth Beaton's *Sutherland: An Illustrated Architectural Guide* (1995) provides a crisp introduction to the area's built environment.

The Scottish Society for Northern Studies' conference at Bettyhill in 1992 sought to complement rather than duplicate earlier studies. *The Province of Strathnaver*, therefore, concentrates mainly on new research, some of which was presented at the conference and some of which has been completed since. In line with earlier practice in the Society's monograph series, certain chapters also reflect more extensive and detailed studies. It is

a wide-ranging, multi-disciplinary collection, frequently site- or area-specific, and the Society is pleased to record its gratitude to all contributors. In a climate of continually increasing pressures and restrictions, we well recognise how difficult it can be to find the time and resources to carry out new research and to prepare it for publication. We would also express particular thanks to Jim Johnston and Pat and Elliot Rudie (Bettyhill) for unstinting help before and during the Society's Conference, and for much friendly advice thereafter; and to Jim Johnston for so freely making available both geological material for inclusion in this Preface and a selection of illustrations. As always, warm thanks are due to Donald Omand (Scrabster) and colleagues in the Department of Continuing Education, University of Aberdeen; and it is a particular pleasure to record the contribution of Willie Thomson, Burray, Orkney, in reading and commenting on all of the papers.

For grants towards publication, the Society much appreciates the support of Historic Scotland and Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise. In addition, a number of institutions and individuals have provided assistance in kind or at significantly reduced cost: Joanna Close-Brookes, Tom Gray, John Hume, National Museums of Scotland (Scottish Life Archive), Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, School of Scottish Studies (University of Edinburgh). On a point of information, the Scottish Record Office (SRO) has recently been renamed, albeit not in this volume, as the National Archives of Scotland (NAS).

The Province of Strathnaver follows *Caithness: A Cultural Crossroads* (1982), *Firthlands of Ross and Sutherland* (1986) and *Peoples and Settlement in North-West Ross* (1994). With *Scandinavian Shetland: An Ongoing Tradition?* (1978), *Shetland's Northern Links; History and Language* (1996) and a volume on Orkney to follow, the Society will soon have published studies covering all the most northerly districts of the Scottish mainland and the Northern Isles. We hope this achievement will prove a lasting contribution to our knowledge and understanding of life and settlement, historical and cultural inter-relationships in the north.

John R. Baldwin
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