

# **Kisimul Castle:**

## **Recent Work by Historic Scotland**

*Sally Foster*

THE aim of what follows is to provide an introduction to Kisimul Castle, describing the work that Historic Scotland has undertaken to date. I will flag up what I think are the some of the Castle's more curious and interesting features. But you will soon appreciate that Kisimul still holds many of its secrets and we do not have all the answers to give.

Kisimul Castle is one of the most spectacularly sited castles in Scotland, lying on an island in Castle Bay, Barra. It is also the best-preserved upstanding castle in the Western Isles. It is the residence of a small lordship forming part of the historically significant and geographically distinctive Lordship of the Isles. As such it is an icon of Gaeldom, a highly recognisable survival of a time when Gaelic military power, culture and language held absolute sway over the West Highlands and Islands.

Since 31 March 2000, the Castle has been leased to Historic Scotland by the Macneil of Barra for up to 1000 years. Historic Scotland's efforts since this time have focused on developing a package of management proposals for the most effective protection, conservation, presentation, interpretation and management of the monument. At the time of writing (Dec. 2002), these proposals are shortly to be presented to Macneil of Barra, so that the future of the monument can be decided. The foundation of any Monument Management Plan is knowledge and understanding of the site in question, and this paper will be concentrating on what we have recently learnt about the history and development of the Castle. Equally important will be the key questions that remain unanswered.

This paper describes the outcome of detailed buildings survey, documentary research and preliminary archaeological explorations ably

undertaken for Historic Scotland by Headland Archaeology Ltd (Boardman and Brann 2001; Brann, McNeill and Morrison 2001; McNeill 2001; Morrison 2001; Walker and Holden 2001). The overall project was managed for Headland by Dr Tim Holden. In relaying key observations and ideas I am *not* going to cover the detailed survey of the condition of the monument that has also been undertaken by surveyors, architects and structural engineers, a vital and very important strand of our work, managed by Historic Scotland District Architect, Mike Pendery.

### ***Background***

Most of what was known about the Castle before the recent research is to be found summarised in two publications. Firstly, the architectural survey and historical review undertaken by John Dunbar of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland in 1967 and 1968 (Dunbar 1978). Secondly, *Castle in the Sea*, R L Macneil's account of his 20th-century crusade to purchase and restore the Castle (Macneil 1964). The Castle has been much altered in the 20th century and it is important to recognise and understand the consequences of this.

Documentary sources for the castle are few. Interesting, if not historically reliable, local traditions prevail, notably regarding early clan history. The surviving documentary evidence strongly suggests that the castle is a late medieval construction, dateable to the period c. 1370 to 1549 and perhaps as late as 1427 to 1549 (Dunbar 1978; Boardman and Brann 2001). The building of the castle may well have been prompted by changes in the structure of political lordship in the region at this time, notably the rise of the Barra-based MacNeill kindred to a new level of political and social influence and independence at the time of the break-up of the wider Lordship of Garmoran. There is no evidence to support or disprove the idea that the MacNeills were resident on the island before the beginning of the 15th century. The absence of any mention in Fordoun's later 14th-century list of island strongholds is likely to be significant and a date of construction in the first half of the 15th century is entirely possible on historical grounds. (For an alternative view, see Macneil, this volume.) Superiority over Barra and Kisimul was claimed by the MacDonald Lords of the Isles (to 1493), directly owned by the crown between 1493 and 1621, by the MacKenzie Lords of Tarbat (between 1621 and at least 1656) and thereafter, apparently, by the MacDonalds of Sleat. However, throughout this period the

island and castle were actually under the control of the MacNeills, who abandoned it as their residence in the early 18th century.

The first reference to the castle is in 1549, when Dean Monro described it as ‘ane castell in ane ile, upon ane strenthie craig callit Keselum pertaining to Mcneill of Barra’ (Munro 1961). The MacNeills were descended from Gill-Adhamnain MacNeill, who had received possession of Barra by a charter of Alexander Macdonald, Lord of the Isles, on 23 June 1427. By 15th-century tradition, if not earlier, the MacNeills claimed Irish descent from Niall of the Nine Hostages, although this genealogy is suspect. They were part of an elite group of smaller lairds who were members of the Council of the Isles, the body advising the Lord of the Isles (traditionally meeting on the Council Isle at Finlaggan, Islay). Otherwise very little is known of their medieval history.

The castle was evidently still well defended in the late 17th century. In around 1695, Martin Martin was refused access, reporting: ‘There is a stone wall round it two stories high, reaching the sea, and within the wall there is an old tower and an hall, with other houses about it. There is a little magazine in the tower, to which no stranger has access’ (Martin Martin 1934, 157).

By the mid-18th century the castle had been abandoned, and in 1795 its roofs and floors may have been destroyed by fire, although in 1816 it is described as ‘still tolerably entire’. In 1868 it was rented out as a herring curing station, and this led to the removal of parts of the site for ballast.

The MacNeills finally lost Barra in 1836-7, but chief of Clan MacNeill, R L Macneil, father of the present Clan Chief, Ian R Macneil of Barra, purchased the estate in 1937. The castle lay in ruins until this point. Macneil cleared the site of rubble, and between 1956 and his death in 1970, most of the castle was consolidated and recreated (the kitchen was finished shortly after this) (figure 1).

### *Description: overview*

The aim in what follows is to provide an overview, before touring the castle as it appeared before and after its recreation.<sup>1</sup>

The monument takes the form of an enclosure castle with tower-house, hall and ancillary buildings. Available architectural, documentary and

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<sup>1</sup> This was conjectural and involved the introduction of new material, hence the use of ‘reconstruction’ under the strict definitions of international charters is not appropriate.



*Figure 1. Kisimul Castle in 2000: the interior courtyard.*

*From left to right, the visible buildings are tower, Tanist House, hall and chapel.*

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archaeological evidence, both negative and positive, support the conclusion that it was founded in the 1400s. There are those who think the upstanding structures are earlier – Cruden (1960, 42) considered the castle to date from the 13th century, if not earlier – but there is no evidence from the recent work to suggest that this is the case. Reliable diagnostic architectural features are conspicuous by their absence. A lancet loop incorporated in the wall core in the original parapet of the tower gives a *terminus post quem* of the early 13th century for the construction of the tower as the primary building. The medieval remains of the castle reflect the more simple architecture of this area of Scotland. Although there is nothing intrinsically distinguished or special about its architecture, there are few immediate parallels for the precise layout of the castle.

Comparison with other sites, and in particular Breachacha Castle, Isle of Coll, supports the conclusion that Kisimul was founded in the 1400s. Potential

parallels with the unexcavated site of Calvay, off North Uist, merit further investigation. With the exception of prehistoric finds there is as yet there is no conclusive evidence for pre-15th century occupation on the island. Whatever the date of the visible upstanding remains, however, it is possible that the rock upon which it stands had been fortified in earlier times. Further archaeological work is the only means of addressing the question of the castle's date and development.

Headland's suggested phasing of the development of the Castle is broadly similar to that of the Royal Commission (figure 2). The terminology used here to describe each building is that adopted by Macneil (1964) and adapted by the Royal Commission (Dunbar 1978). The function ascribed to some of the buildings is questionable.

#### Phase 1

- *15th century*: construction of tower-house, curtain-wall (later than tower, but conceived as part of same scheme), prison tower and hall; probably other buildings.
- Chapel added, not necessarily long after prison tower.
- Building on site of Tanist House in *15th or early 16th century*.

#### Phase 2

- *16th century*: tower-house and curtain walls raised; castle entrance narrowed; earliest phase of Gokman's House; crew house constructed.

#### Phase 3

- *17th century*: Gokman's house extended; castle entrance moved closer to tower-house; conversion of hall into a two storey building; construction of addition; postern gate blocked.

#### Phase 4

- 20th century recreation and consolidation.

The three-storey **tower house**, standing at the S end, was the first element of the castle to be built, as can be seen from the butt joint between it and the curtain wall, but the curtain wall and tower were surely planned as a single entity from the start (figure 3). (None the less, there are some that dispute the tower's primacy). The tower rises three storeys high. Approached from a stone forestar,

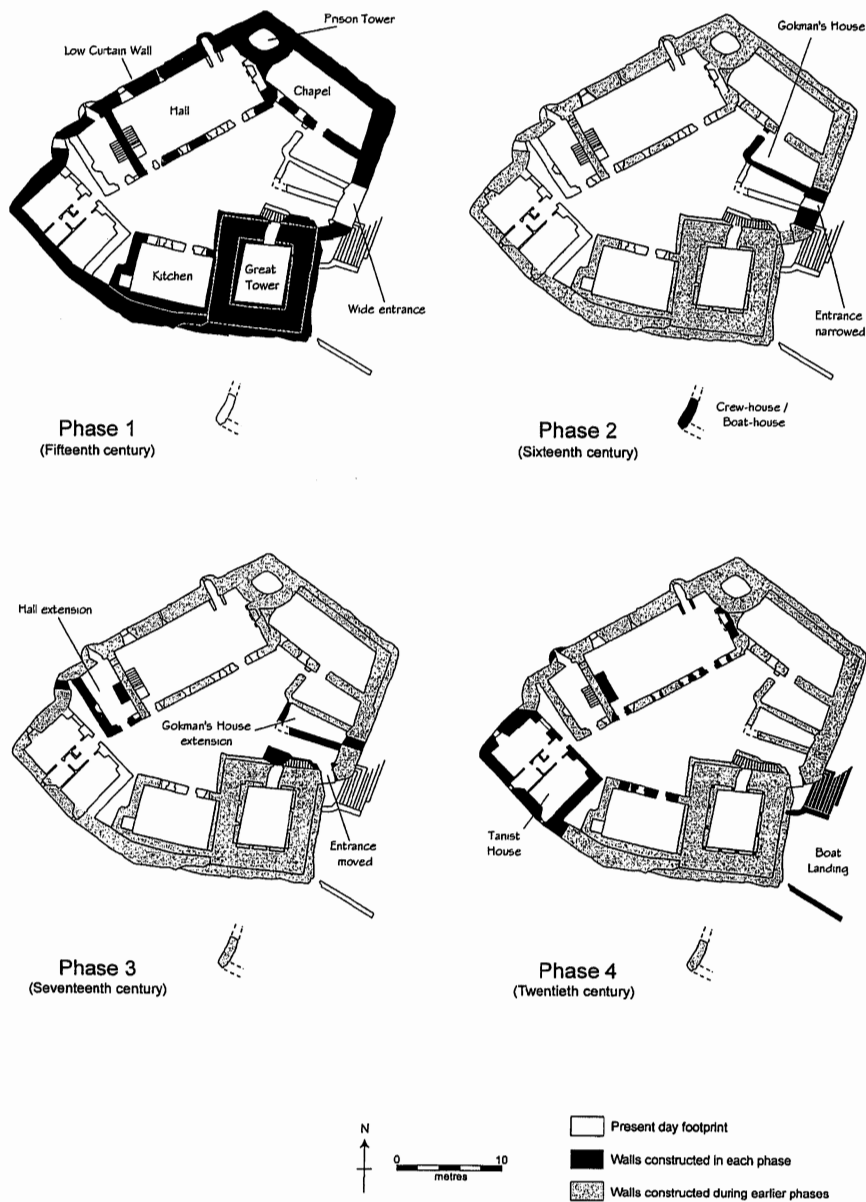


Figure 2. Phased plans of Kisimul Castle (Brann, McNeill and Morrison 2001).  
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*Figure 3. Kisimul Castle in 1956: exterior from south, showing joint between tower and curtain wall. The gap in the curtain wall to the left is where the Tanist House now stands. The gables beyond belong to the hall and its addition. Crown copyright reproduced courtesy of Historic Scotland.*

a ground floor-chamber is entered from a low doorway and would have provided secure storage space. A small item of gold filigree, provisionally dated to the 16th century, was excavated recently from the floor of this tower – see below. The external staircase continued in timber and/or stone up to the adjacent curtain wall-walk, from which another timber stair, cantilevered from the face of the tower, can be presumed to have given access to the main door, 5.5m above

ground level. Inside, a mural stair led from here up to the second floor (the private apartment of the lord) and down to the first (likely to have been the private apartment of a senior, trusted retainer who controlled access to the stores below). All the floors were originally of timber, as was the roof. However, in the 1956-70 recreation concrete floors were cast in situ at first-floor level. The first and second floors were evidently domestic in purpose, both being well lit and having latrine closets within their walls. Both apparently also had timber galleries at their N ends, that above the second floor being in effect within the garret. This was probably where the lord slept. From the second floor, another mural stair leads from the right-hand side of the N window up to the wall-head.

The crenellated parapet encloses a latrine in the SW corner, and shows signs of later heightening. This and other later work included a **box-machicolation** projecting directly above the tower's entrance. On the S and E a timber wall-walk was carried on beams which ran through the parapet; this *may* have supported projecting **external timber hoarding**, designed to protect the tower's exposed outer faces (see below).

The **curtain-wall** that abuts the tower was built later, though possibly by not very much (again, some dispute this). Its parapet, like that of the tower, was also subsequently heightened and provided with a timber wall-walk (possibly also with projecting hoarding) and with a **slot-machicolation** above the wide entrance-gateway. The precise nature of the original gateway is unknown; it may have had a portcullis, but this scenario supposes a substantial timber gate-work behind it, for which there is as yet no evidence. Against one wall stood the so-called **hall**, the development of which is poorly understood. After the tower, this is the most important building in the castle, and it may have had a timber predecessor. Built after the hall, the obtuse angle of the enclosure was occupied by a rounded internal tower, standing apparently no higher than the wall and containing a pit-**prison** with latrine below a guard room. Another building now roofed in timber which is of questionable historical authenticity, lies against the curtain-wall and post-dates the prison tower. It now serves as a mortuary **chapel**, which is what R L Macneil thought it was. The evidence that it was originally one is flimsy; indeed an 1868 reference suggests that the chapel was originally where the so-called Tanist House now stands (Campbell 1998, 209; Boardman and Brann 2001).

Sometime during the 17th century pressure of space led to the postern-gate being blocked up and an addition (extension) being built on the hall, partly blocking the well. R L Macneil called this 'Marion's Addition' in the belief that



it could be attributed to the 15th-century 'Marion of the Heads'. A second storey was added to the hall; the tower-house may no longer have been the main lordly residence. The modern buildings bear the closest resemblance to the buildings of this phase. When the hall was recreated in 1958-60, the wall facing the courtyard was largely rebuilt and a concrete upper floor inserted inside. New stone steps to a small balcony were built at one end of the hall, from where access was also created to the addition. Above the hall the floor was divided by Macneil into three rooms by reinforced concrete walls, accessed from a covered corridor in the position of the wall walk.

The other buildings constructed against the inside face of the curtain wall appear to be of a later period. They include a **kitchen** range of two storeys adjoining the tower, now re-roofed. This originally had two ground floor entrances as well as a first floor doorway. In the west corner, the building known as the **Tanist** (or heir's) **House**, rebuilt in 1956-7 from the foundations of what may have been the chapel, was inhabited seasonally until recently. Beside the entrance gate are the unrestored foundations of what R L Macneil described as the **Gokman's** (or watchman's) **House**, the construction of which required the partial closure of the original entrance-gateway.

When the Gokman's house was extended it was necessary to block the entrance-gateway totally and to open a new entrance (the present one). At some point a two storey building now known as the **crew-house** was built outside the castle walls, perhaps to provide additional accommodation.

### *Description: tour*

The following seeks to give you an impression of what the castle looked like before it was consolidated and recreated by Macneil. It has to be acknowledged that the scale, extent and nature of the 20th-century works has affected the monument in terms of our ability to appreciate it as a medieval castle. The concrete, which is decaying badly, has also left the managers of the monument with difficult issues to resolve when it comes to the question of how best to conserve and present the historic fabric of the monument.

In wishing to make the Castle habitable and usable as a clan centre, R L Macneil had to make certain compromises (Macneil 1964, 177):

In my work I have tried to restore meticulously. At the same time I have endeavoured to make the castle habitable, as we would regard that word in the

twentieth century, and also to secure the utmost durability for future centuries. Thus I have used reinforced concrete floors and beams instead of combustible timber ones, such as existed previously. I have used slate roofs instead of thatch. Then, too, I have tried to consider what modernisation would have taken place if my family had continued to live in the castle after 1748.

As a medieval building, the tower has fared best through this, but the 20th-century works have compromised the appearance and historical integrity of the hall, chapel, prison, tower and kitchen. On the plus side, this build certainly conveys a sense of the busy, domestic occupation of the castle, something that is missing from so many ruins (see figure 1).

Unfortunately no detailed building survey existed of the Castle prior to Macneil's works – the RCAHMS had only prepared a ground plan in 1928 (RCAHMS 1928, 126-8, no. 439) – and we are largely reliant on photographs for evidence of its appearance prior to its consolidation, etc. These photographs are of particular value when it comes to the question of what the original form and development of the wall-heads might have been, notably the question of whether or not Kisimul had external timber hourdings projecting from both the tower and curtain wall.

We believe that the walls of the tower and curtain wall were both raised in close succession, probably in the 16th century. This closely parallels development at Breachacha on Coll, which also has similar stone box-machiolations. Some of the evidence for this is now lost under Macneil's concrete render and it can be difficult to recognise what is what on site, not least since the modern wall-walk is largely at ahistoric levels.

The easiest way for visitors to appreciate this is by looking at the outside of the walls, because there are two very obvious lines of holes (figure 4). The lower line relates to the primary stone wall-walk – they are the weep holes for this. Those above relate to a secondary timber wall-walk, which rested on the lower one – they are the putlog holes for the timbers. This is most obvious on the outside of the hall. You can also see in this figure a change in the external render, where the wall was heightened, a detail that is now lost. Some of the crenelles from the first phase of walling were adapted in the second phase, i.e. they were left as openings of some description.

It has been argued, in the case of the tower-house, that these openings were designed to allow access to timber hourdings that projected from the upper wall (figure 5). Headland's analysis of the building has brought out the fact that



*Figure 4. Kisimul Castle in 1956: exterior from the northeast. The wall to the right of the prison tower shows evidence for heightening of the wall, details now largely lost under concrete render. Crown copyright reproduced courtesy of Historic Scotland.*



*Figure 5. Kisimul Castle in 1956: exterior from southeast. Crown copyright reproduced courtesy of Historic Scotland.*

access to this parapet could only have ever been through the lord's private chambers (Brann, McNeill and Morrison 2001). As such it is doubtful that its aim was primarily defensive: its value as a recreational facility offering a good view would have also been important to a lord. Either way, in comparison to other castles which are known to have had hourdings, the evidence at Kisimul is rather weak, and certainly seems highly unlikely for any part of the curtain wall.

The curtain wall of the Castle did not all survive into the 20th century, with much of the evidence for the precise form of the wall-heads missing, as well as a very large section of the curtain wall. Little more than part of a gable wall survived of what is now recreated as the Tanist House (see figure 3).

Whilst the so-called addition survived to gable height, scarcely any of the hall did. Figure 6 shows the upper line of holes for the secondary timber walkway. This also gives you an impression of how much of the wall-head above the walkway must also have been lost. You will also note here the vast pile of stones. Macneil undertook extensive stone clearance of the structures, as well as a lot of ground disturbance. When we came to the Castle in 2000, Historic Scotland was not sure whether any significant archaeological levels would remain undisturbed.



*Figure 6. Kisimul Castle in 1956: addition and hall during clearance by R L Macneil. Crown copyright reproduced courtesy of Historic Scotland.*





*Figure 7. Kisimul Castle in 1956: northeast corner of hall and upper level of prison tower. Crown copyright reproduced courtesy of Historic Scotland.*



Something else to be aware of if you visit the Castle is that we do not know whether Macneil's concrete ground floors relate to a historical floor level. The only way of telling would be to remove the concrete and excavate beneath. Cores taken by engineers for Historic Scotland were examined by the archaeologists and would suggest that further archaeological levels do indeed survive beneath. Note the low doorway on the left of figure 7. This leads from the hall down to a latrine that is flushed by the sea, but was this always quite so subterranean? There is no evidence for a fireplace in this end of the hall, although Macneil created one. A stone basin also sits in the hall in this photograph. Macneil interpreted this as a font and placed it in the building he used as a chapel. It is probably a stone mortar of some description.

In figure 8 you are looking at the prison tower from the opposite side, the chapel end. The chronological relationship of these three buildings is nigh on impossible to disentangle from the remains in their present form, but future



*Figure 8. Kisimul Castle in 1956: interior of chapel and upper level of prison tower. Crown copyright reproduced courtesy of Historic Scotland.*



archaeology may hold the answers. Note again here the remnants of the stone walk-way and the line of holes for its timber successor above. In the corner, on the right, there must have been a further raised structure of some description.

Next door to the chapel was the original entrance to the Castle. This can be seen most clearly on the outside curtain wall, where its later blocking stands out in the different renders (see figure 5).

This is the point at which to introduce the archaeological excavations which took place in 2001. As mentioned previously, Historic Scotland could not be sure whether any significant sub-surface archaeology had survived the works by R L Macneil. We know from his descriptions in *Castle in the Sea* that he disturbed archaeological levels and made finds that included pottery and a length of gold chain (Macneil 1964, 50-51, 163). Although some of this now survives it is unstratified and of limited archaeological value. Headland Archaeology Ltd undertook a series of small exploratory excavations (figure 9). The aim was primarily to give us an assessment of what might survive, particularly in areas that seemed to us to be of particular interest, and this included the gateway and area of the so-called Gokman's House, of which foundations only survive – marked here as 'remnant wall'. The excavations in Trench 2 were only of a superficial nature, but sufficient to demonstrate that there is a depth of good stratigraphy surviving in this area, and that the Gokman's House was used for metalworking at a late stage in its history. Whether this building was ever built to provide accommodation for a watchman is questionable. This was the only trench that provided evidence of floor surfaces relating to the occupation of the Castle. We can therefore hope that some evidence might perhaps also survive for any internal structures associated with the various phases of entranceway.

If the original wide entrance included a portcullis then a platform would be required for winding gear and counter-weights, and an entrance tower housing these might be speculated. There is slot over the original entrance. Its width indicates that it relates to the narrowing of the entrance and is a machiolation rather than portcullis slot.

Inside the tower, potentially complex stratigraphy still survives to a depth of over 1m. This is part water-logged, which means that there is the potential for recovery of organic remains. The most significant find from 2001, and the one that has caught the public imagination, to judge from media interest, is a tiny, decorated, filigree gold tag, less than 2 cm long (figure 10) (AOC Archaeology Group 2001). This was found in one of two small trenches in the tower-house.

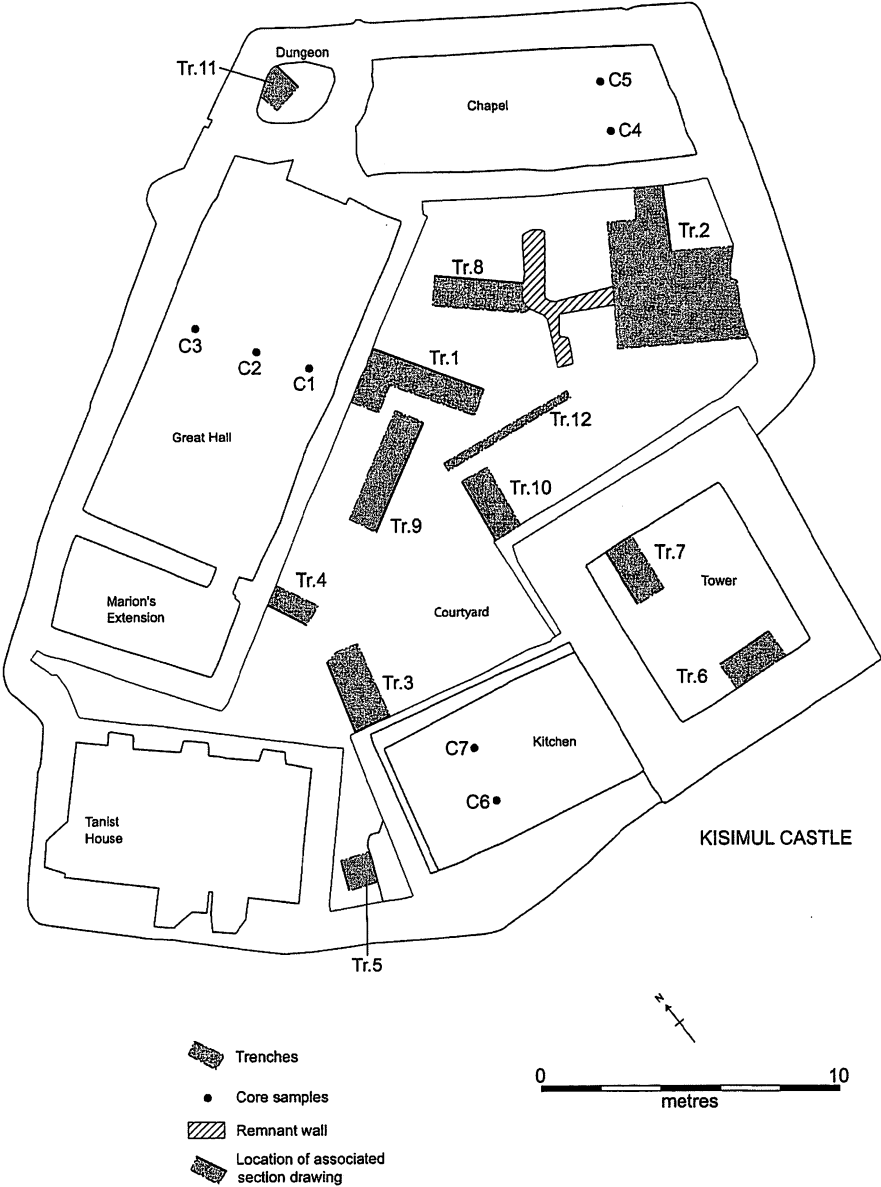
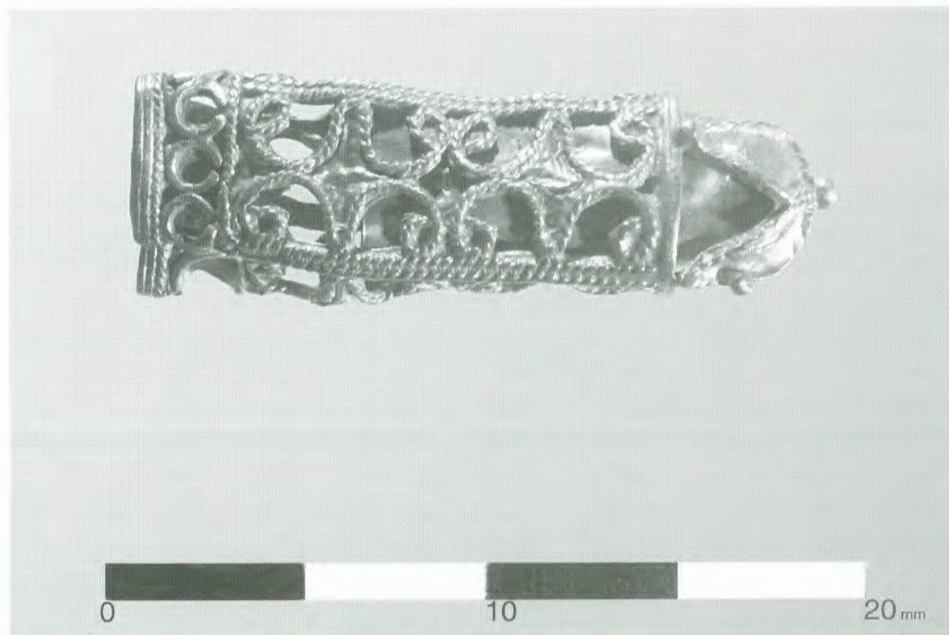


Figure 9. Kisimul Castle: location of exploratory excavations in 2001 (Morrison 2001).  
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Yet to be studied in any detail, it is provisionally dated to around the 16th century and may be of West Highland or Irish manufacture. It seems most likely to have been attached to an object such as a purse, rather than clothing. A further significant find from the tower, but one that is definitely far earlier, is a very nice, worked, burnt flint blade. Knives such as these are most frequently found with male burials of the later Neolithic and early Bronze Age. No evidence for burial was found here, but the possibility is that this and the other flaked stones we found relate to something that was disturbed at the time of construction of the Castle, or that these were curios brought to the site in medieval or post-medieval times.

Elsewhere the trenches provided evidence for a series of levelling deposits associated with phases of building on the island. These confirmed, as we had thought, that the kitchen belonged late in the overall building sequence. In Trench 1 (see figure 9) a stone-built capped drain was found underlying, and hence pre-dating, the wall of the hall. It may prove to be significant that none of the imported wheel-made medieval pottery found so far in any of the trenches



*Figure 10. Filigree gold tag (less than 2 cm long) from 2001 excavations at Kisimul Castle (AOC Archaeology Group 2001). Crown copyright reproduced courtesy of Historic Scotland.*

pre-dates the 15th century. However, it has to be acknowledged that the 'coarse' hand-made medieval pottery of the Western Isles is little understood, largely because of a lack of well-excavated and securely dated material, so perhaps some of this is earlier. We looked for, but failed to find a second well that Macneil shows as being in the courtyard. No evidence was found in any of the trenches for roof coverings, and we assume that all buildings were originally thatched or shingled. The roofs would have been too steep for the use of turf. Tie-stones for securing the thatch to the hall roof can still be seen.

Beneath the medieval levels was extensive evidence for prehistoric occupation of the island. Pottery, flint and cereal remains are associated with a series of buried soils. The finds suggest a date within the Bronze Age or Neolithic periods. A putative hearth was identified which, together with charred cereal grain, primarily hulled barley with the occasional emmer grain, could indicate a domestic element to the prehistoric settlement. The exact nature and duration of this occupation is, however, unclear at present.

Little has yet been said about what exists outside the curtain walls. Two features are obvious: the crew house mentioned earlier and a tidal fish trap or galley berth. No underwater archaeology survey has been undertaken so it is not known if there is anything else of significance in this area.

## *Conclusions*

So where does this all leave us? We know that the island on which the Castle sits was occupied in prehistory, and that it retains the potential for archaeology to be able to tell us more about its date and development. The most important area in this respect is the gateway, which has the most complicated sequence of construction – at least three successive phases. It would also be nice to know more about the relationship between the hall, prison tower and chapel, the evidence for which is masked by modern works.

On the basis of present evidence, we feel comfortable with the 15th-century date for the visible remains that was suggested by the Royal Commission, although we differ over the interpretation of some features and would place a slightly different emphasis on the development and role of the Castle. We see the tower-house as being a good example of social engineering rather than having a primarily military role. Its interior was divided into two separate lodgings: an inferior first floor was for a trusted official or family member who controlled access to the stores beneath; above were the private

chambers of the lord. The small tower-house was not designed to provide public spaces. This interpretation shows the importance of the hall in the original conception of the complex, although we cannot infer anything about the date of the castle complex as a whole from this observation. We can envisage that the lord sat at the west end of the hall, the end which was illuminated by windows on either side. A timber precursor to what survives is a possibility. What we therefore have is the type of image of a medieval lord that might be found elsewhere in Europe at this time, with carefully controlled private and public spaces.

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