

# Dun Cholla

## Colonsay

### Survey and test excavation

### Interim Report



Dun Cholla (1855 Admiralty Chart)

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## Introduction

In 2011 the University of Ulster, in tandem with a network of researchers and institutions across Northern Ireland and Scotland, received a grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) to initiate a programme of community based archaeology and research focussing on late medieval maritime society. One of the target areas was the Island of Colonsay and subsequently the university with Kilmartin House Museum and Historic Scotland undertook a small excavation and walk-over survey at Dun Cholla (NR 3775 9150), a fortified hill located at the southern end of the island. Little is known about the site itself although it probably represents a site that was originally fortified in the Iron Age and later occupied during the medieval period.

## Medieval and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Colonsay

One of the earliest historical references to the island is contained in 7<sup>th</sup>-century Adamnan's Life of St Columba referencing a robber who lived in Coloso (Colonsay). Colonsay is identified in a list of 13 islands in a Durham manuscript recording the travels of a Norse cleric in c.1174 (Marsden 2000). The island was also mentioned in a list of possessions for Iona Abbey in 1203. The chronicler John Fordun writing c.1380 recorded a community of Canons Regular on Colonsay, a reference to the Priory on Ornsay. The Prior of this establishment was first mentioned in 1353 and the site was probably established sometime in the period 1325-50, a relatively late date. Possessions on the island were confirmed by David II in 1344 to John, lord of the isles and the island was subsequently held by the McDuffies, traditionally the record keepers for the Lordship of the Isles Sir Donald McDuffie, from Colonsay, witnessed a charter of John, Earl of Ross in 1463. In the 1440s the Scotichronicon repeated Fordun's mention of Colonsay 'where there is an abbey of Augustinian Canons Regular'. An early 16<sup>th</sup>-century graveslab on Iona records Malcolm McDuffie, 'Lord of Dunevin in Colonsay' A small chapel in the south wall of the Priory held a gravestone to Murchardus McDuffie who died in 1539 while Sir Donald McDuffie was abbot of Ornsay 1549.

In 1549 Monro described Colonsay as follows 'Northward from the isle of Ornsay, be ane half myle of sea, lyes ane ile, callit Colnansay, seven myle lange the northeist to the southwest, with twa myle bredthe, ane fertile ile guid for quhit fishing. It ha h ane paroch kirke. This ile is bruikit be ane gentle capitane, callit M'Duffyhe, and pertened of auld to Clandonald of Kyntyre'. Following the McDonald rebellion of 1615 Coll Ciotach acquired Colonsay over Malcom MacDuffie who he subsequently killed in 1623. His grant of the island was negotiated with Archibald, 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Argyll. Coll was subsequently evicted from the island in 169 by Archibald, 8<sup>th</sup> Earl of Argyll. Coll's son Alasdair subsequently sided with the Earl of Antrim and made a name for himself as a military leader. Coll Ciotach garrisoned Dunyvaig but was subsequently captured and executed.

At the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Martin Martin (1695) provided a more detailed description – 'The Isle Colonsay is four miles in length from east to west, and above a mile in breadth. The mould is brown and sandy on the coast, and affords but a very small product, though they plough their ground three times; the middle is rocky and heathy, which in most places is prettily mingled with thick evergreens of erica-baccifera, juniper, and cat's tail. The cattle bred here are cows, horses, and sheep, all of a low size. The inhabitants are generally well proportioned, and of a black complexion; they speak only the Irish tongue, and use the habit, diet etc., that is used in the West in Isles: they are all Protestants, and observe the festivals of Christmas, Easter, and Good Friday; but the women only observe the festival of the nativity of the blessed Virgin. Kilouran is the principal church in this isle, and the village in which this church is, hath its name from it. There are two ruinous chapels in the south side of this isle. There were two stone

chests found lately in Kilouran sands, which were composed of five stones each, and had human bones in them. There are some fresh-water lakes abounding with trouts in thus isle. There are likewise several forts here...’.



Figure 1: Bleau's 1654 map of Colonsay (redrawn) on the left set against a modern map of the island on the right.

## Dun Cholla

A number of historical survey accounts for Dun Cholla have been published. In 1695 Martin Martin refers to the site as 'Duncoll' one of a number of forts located on the island and stated that it was 'near the middle of the isle, it hath large stones in it, and the wall is seven feet broad'.

Piggott and Piggott (1948) described the site as a 'fort measuring 200' NE-SW by 80' within a wall over 10' thick. The entrance 5' wide, is in the east, the only accessible side, the others being precipitous cliff. There are traces of outworks on the NE and much debris lies about the slopes. At the NW end of the interior is a stone-walled hut foundation 25' across with a concentric ring of internal post holes as well as a central post hole. On the mainland such a structure would be dated to the first few centuries AD. The whole interior is uneven with outcropping rock but there are traces of a wall forming a small

enclosure in the SE corner'. The site was revisited by the Ordnance Survey in April 1974 and described as measuring '60.0m EW by 24.0m. The wall on the E is 4.0m thick and three courses high. The outer face is still visible on the N and NW while on the S and SW only a line of rubble remains. Within the fort are the foundations of two circular huts one measuring 7.5m in diameter whilst the other is incomplete but probably measured about 8.0m in diameter. There are no traces of outworks to the NE' (RCHAMS online).

As part of the broader Argyll survey Dun Cholla was visited by RCHAMS surveyors in 1984. It was then described as a fort occupying the southern 'end of a rocky promontory about 800m WNW of Balerominmore farmhouse. The S and W sides are protected by sheer cliffs, but from the NE the approach is up a gentle grass-covered slope. The fort is defended by a single wall which encloses an area measuring 54m by a maximum of 25m. On the NE, where there is least natural protection, the wall is up to 6m thick, and the outer facing-stones, which are unusually large and well coursed, stand to a height of 1.25m in four courses; elsewhere the wall is about 1.5m thick. Immediately SE of the entrance there is a short stretch of medial walling, probably designed to reinforce the greater wall-thickness in this sector, and on the NW the lowest course of the outer face is founded on a revetted platform in order to give it greater stability. The entrance, which lies on the NE, was modified in antiquity. Originally it measured 1.8m in width at its outer end and was checked on the inside at a point 1.8m from the outside. Later the passage was reduced to a width of 1.4m by adding an extra skin of stone to the S side, and a new check was built 2.9m from the outer end; at the same time the lowest course of the outer face was continued across the entrance, partially blocking the passage. In the interior there are the footings of two enclosures and a stretch of ruined wall, all of which are of comparatively recent date'.

No mention is made in any of the published surveys of a sub-rectangular earthwork lying at the base of the fort's entrance slope to the immediate northeast of the fortified hillock. There has been an assumption by site visitors that this was the site of a post medieval house, unrelated to Dun Cholla. Certainly its sub-rectangular form is of a very different character to the previously described circular house sites in the interior of the fort but its immediate proximity to the site, its morphological similarities to other late medieval house sites and the archaeological evidence incorporating Cholla were all suggestive of the possible presence of a house associated with Coll MacDonnell at this location.

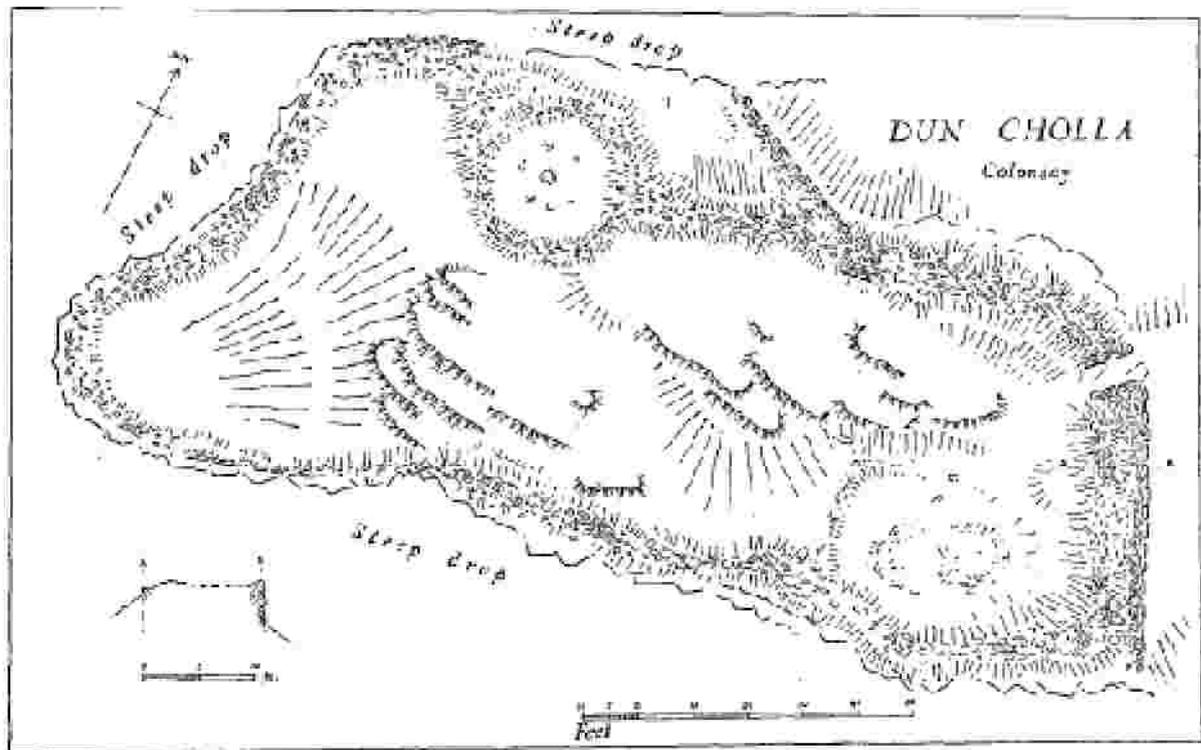


Fig. 6.

Figure 2. Plan of Dun Cholla (from Piggott and Piggott 1948)

#### An Ulster Historical Context

Colla MacDonnell (fourth son of Alexander, 5<sup>th</sup> of Dunyvaig), brother of James and Sorley Boy, fortified a headland at Kenbane, west of Ballycastle in Co Antrim in the 1540s. The branch of the MacDonnells from Islay had regained Dunyveg castle in the early 1540s. He began a renewed campaign where the family sought to increase their power and prestige and landholdings across Ulster and the Isles. In 1551 James Croft initiated a military campaign to lessen the emerging power of the Scots forces in the North. Thomas Cusack, Chancellor of Ireland, wrote an account of the movements of Lord Deputy Croft and Kenbane was mentioned as follows:

'and also Coll M'Connyll, seconde brother to James, had a stronge castill buylded upon a rock, with a strong baan (bawn) of lyme and stoone, over the sea, named the castill of Keanbaan, which my Lorde causid to be defaced, and brake much parte thairof, so as nowe it is not defensible, whiche I am sure thaim neid had for soe muche more displeasir doon to thaim' (Cal S.P. Ire. 1551).

This episode does not seem to have displaced Colla as was still in possession of the site in May 1558 when he died either at the castle or nearby. Coll was married to an O'Cahan (wife also known as Mcneill) of Dunseverick by tradition (Hill 1873). He had two or three sons Gillaspick or Archibald, Alexander or Alistair, and Angus. Gillespig died in 1570 with tradition stating that he was gorged by a bull outside Ballycastle (McDonnell 2005, 141). He was succeeded by his son Colmach.

1558 parts of Kintyre and much of Colonsay granted to James, 6<sup>th</sup> Dunyvaig.

### Excavation

A small test excavation was undertaken at the 'house' platform below Dun Cholla on 19<sup>th</sup> June. This site consists of a sub-rectangular earthwork measuring 13m in overall length and 9.5m in overall width. It contains an internal area of c.50m<sup>2</sup> and appears to have two opposing entrances in the north and south wall respectively. An external ditch, possibly associated with drainage is located at the western gable. No other structural features are apparent but a set of lazy-beds or cultivation ridges are present south of the site.

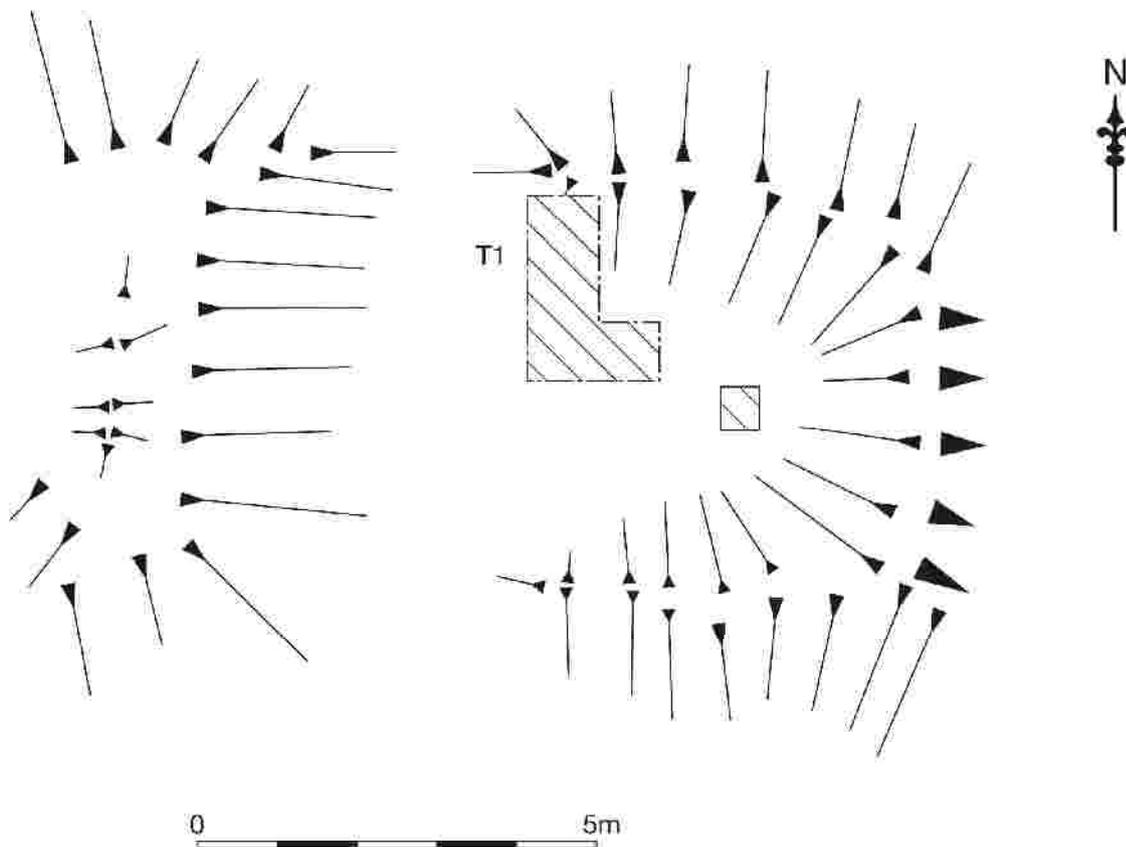


Figure 3: Plan of the 'house' structure with the location of test excavation trench.

An L-shaped trench was positioned in the interior of the earthwork 0.7m east of the northern entrance. The trench measured 2.2m in length along its north/south orientated western side and 1.9m along its southern side and was 0.9m wide. A further 0.5x0.5m test pit was added 0.7m from the trenches southeast corner.

The excavation had a number of primary aims and objectives, namely to -

- Assess the nature of the stratigraphy at the site,
- Attempt to date the earthwork structure,
- Elucidate information relating to its morphology and cultural development,
- Identify material culture associated with the site.

The trench was positioned adjacent to a probable entrance in its northern wall and was located in order to ascertain the nature of the walling and assess the character of surviving archaeology in its interior. The initial topsoil (C.01) removal consisted of a 0.1-0.2m build up of largely wind-blown sediment and grass sod. This overlay an area of rubble collapse (C.02) from a wall that had collapsed inwards. There was little evidence of mortar in this collapse. It was not possible to ascertain whether this wall had collapsed in a single event or gradually over a period of time. A degree of sediment had built up around this collapse but no artefactual material was recovered. What was interesting from this perspective was the complete absence of any 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>-century, or modern finds coming from these deposits or any underlying deposits. This is a rare occurrence and is strongly suggestive of a site abandoned prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Basal stones (C.07) associated with the original wall of the building were encountered 0.8m below the current land surface. This appeared to be of dry-stone construction with clay packing. No identifiable features were noted in the wall and its original height and morphology remain conjectural. Cultural deposits underlay the wall base and it is clear that there was earlier cultural activity at this location prior to the construction of this probable house. The deposits below this level contained a degree of charcoal flecking clearly indicative of burning activity but were otherwise featureless. A circular deposit (C.08) at the base of the trench, contained within the subsoil (C.06), had the initial appearance of a post hole but excavation showed that this was a very shallow deposit (0.05-0.01m in thickness).

A number of other comments can be made about this structure. Firstly, it does not appear on any of the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Ordnance Survey maps of the island or on any of the early Admiralty charts. Cartographic analysis shows that both of these sources were comprehensive in their buildings coverage and strongly suggests the structure predates the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly there are no surviving pathways, gardens or other features around the site suggesting that it had fallen into ruin prior to 1830. A series of lazybeds are present, measuring 1.4-1.5m in width, in the area directly south of the building.

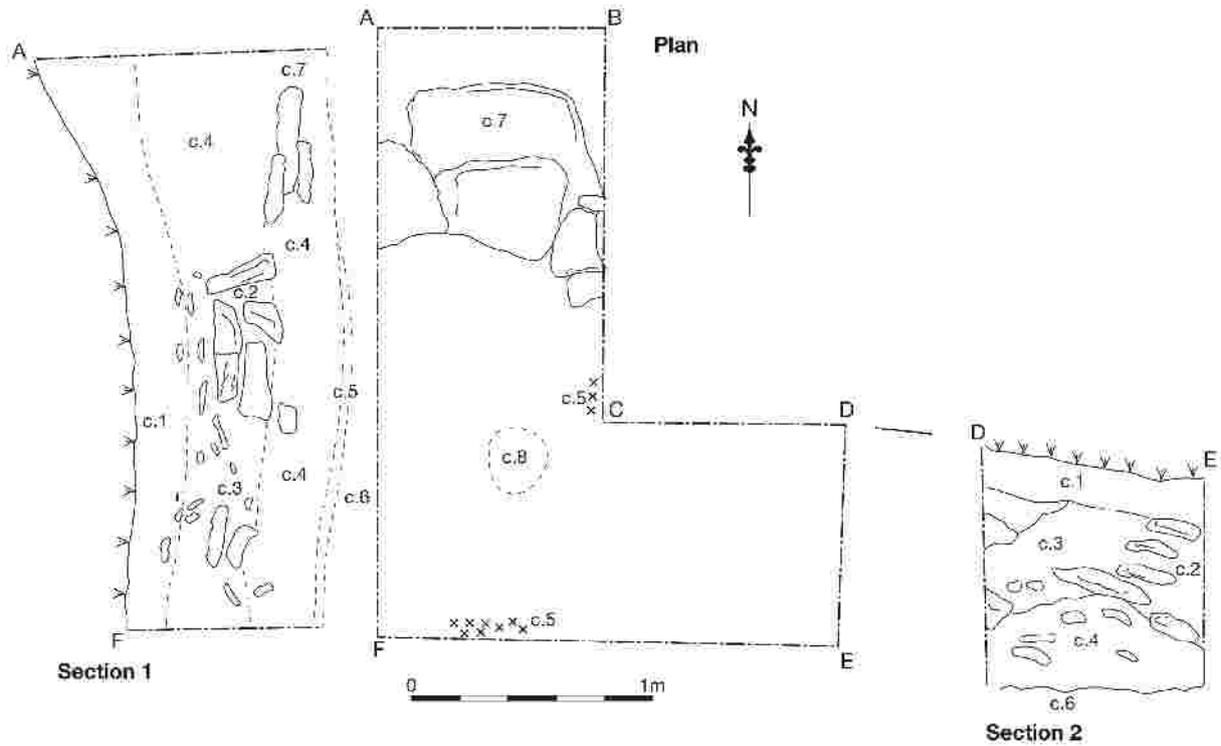


Figure 4: Final excavation plan and sections of the excavated trench.

#### Discussion

This very limited investigation has been informative. This is a multi-phase site with good in-situ preservation and stratigraphy. While no definitive interpretation can be forwarded at this stage a number of hypotheses can be posed:

It is suggested then that this may be a late 16<sup>th</sup>/ 17<sup>th</sup>-century house. The placename and date may associate this place with Colla MacDonnell and his son Coll Ciotach.

Further investigations are required in order ascertain a greater level of information.

## Appendices

### Context List

No.	Type	Description
1.	Deposit	Light brown, wind-blown topsoil
2.	Deposit	Wall collapse with rubble, large stone
3.	Deposit	Buildup of brown soil/ sediment either side of the wall
4.	Deposit	Layer of soil with frequent charcoal flecking
5.	Deposit	Possible occupation surface with frequent charcoal inclusions
6.	Deposit	Subsoil
7.	Wall	Basal section of northern wall of structure
8.	Deposit	Shallow circular deposit

### Finds list

No.	Item	Context	Description
1.	Bone assemblage	03	Small assemblage of probable rodent bones (intrusive)
2.	Corroded iron	04	Possible nail (0.062m L)
3.	Corroded iron	04	Small corroded lump of iron, with stone inclusions (0.04m L, 0.04m W)
4.	Slag	04	Small piece of slag (0.05m L, 0.045m W)
5.	Slag	04	Small piece of slag
6.	Slag	04	Small piece of slag
7.	Slag	04	Small piece of slag
8.	Slag	04	Small piece of slag
9.	Bone	04	Tiny fragment of burnt bone
10.	Bone	04	Tiny fragment of burnt bone
11.	Flint	04	Small sub-rectangular fragment of flint, deliberately struck and shaped, later re-struck. (0.026m L, 0.018m W). Possible late medieval, early 17 <sup>th</sup> -century gun flint
12.	Stone	04	Beach cobble (0.08m diameter), possible rubbing stone
13.	Flint	04	Possible struck flint, debitage
14.	Wood/ charcoal	04	Eight pieces of small twig and wood charcoal

### Sample list

No.	Type	Context
1.	Soil	04



## Bibliography

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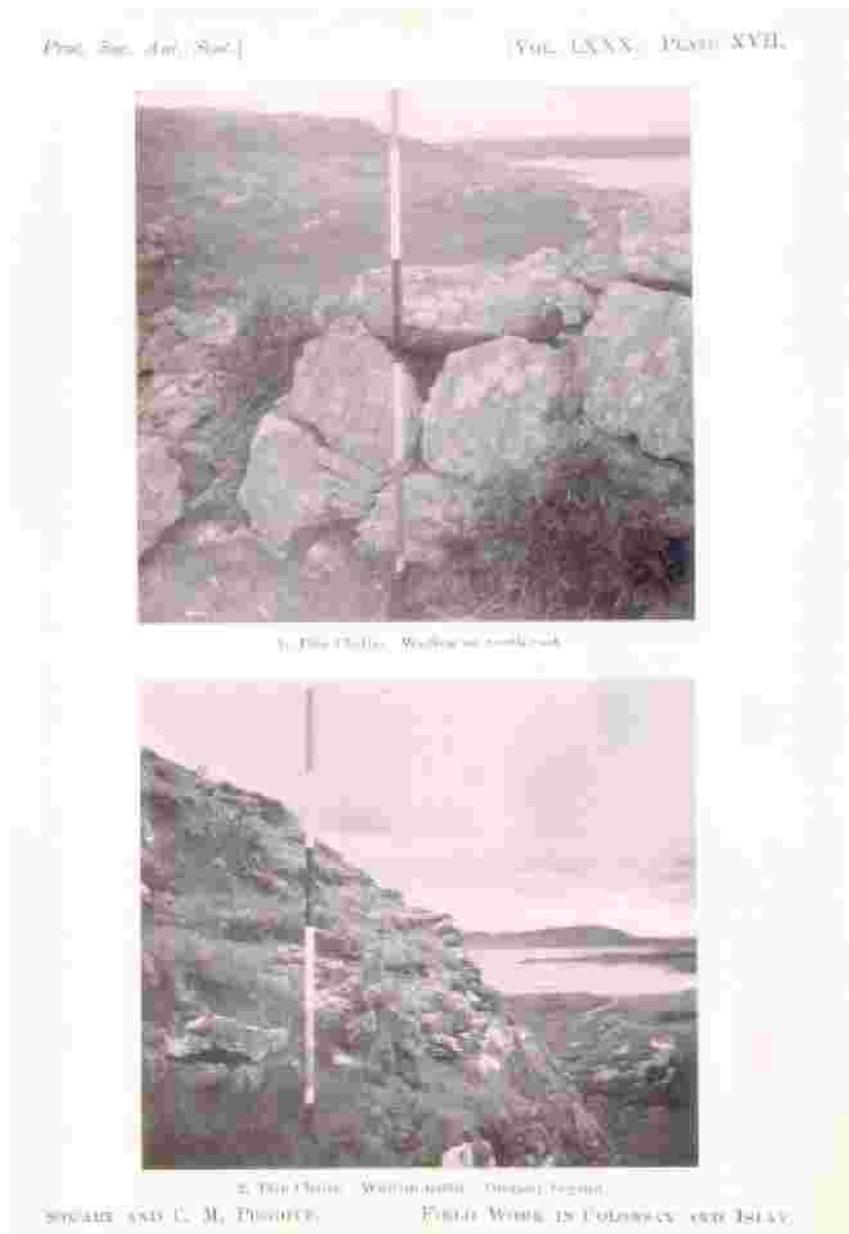


Figure 5: Photographs of Dun Cholla from Piggott and Piggott (1948)



Figure 6: Historic AP of the landscape surrounding Dun Cholla (RCHAMS)



Figure 7: DGPS Survey points over Dun Cholla and the 'house' site (in the top right) under discussion here.



Figure8 : DTM of Dun Cholla

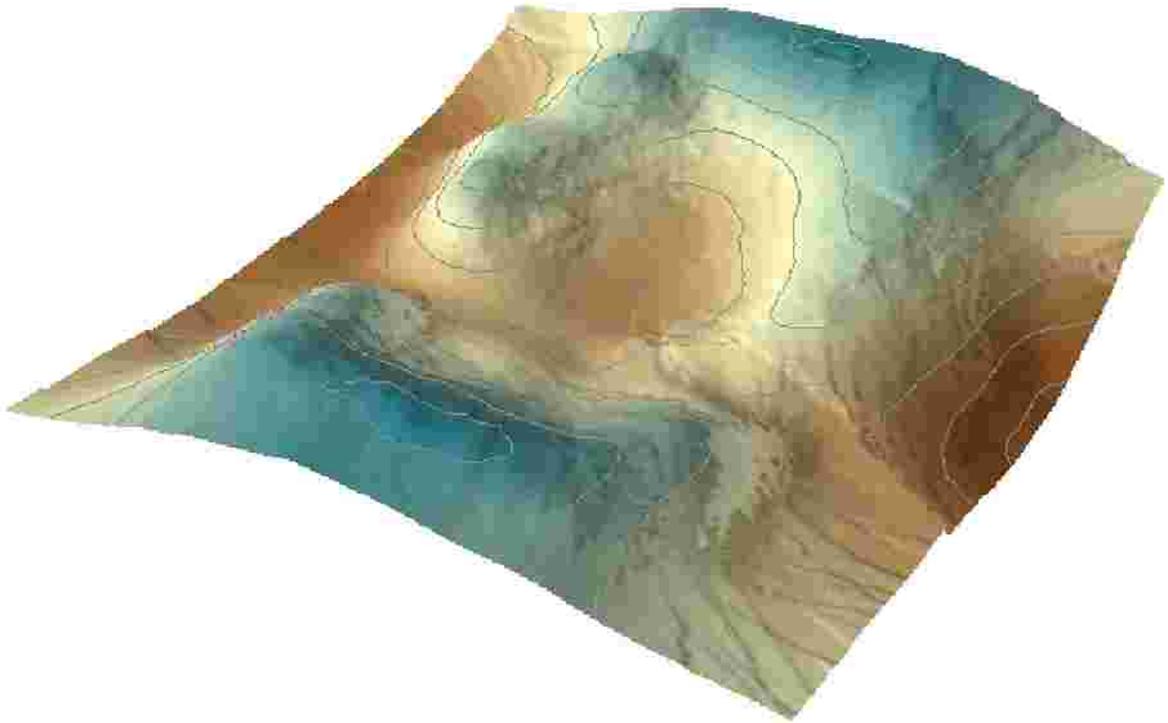


Figure 9: DTM of the 'house' site below Dun Cholla



Figure 10: Local school children participating in the excavation (Photograph from southwest).



Figure: Archaeologist Roddy Regan excavating in Trench 1. Note the structural basal stones to the left of the image (Photograph from the west).