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Ultima Thule? Reconnecting St Kilda and Pabbay

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ABSTRACT

This paper further challenges the understanding of St Kilda as an ultima Thule*, a distant place beyond the borders of the known world. It does this by comparing the World Heritage site and iconic emblem of Scottish culture with the uninhabited island of Pabbay in the Sound of Harris. In the historical period these islands were owned by the Macleods of Dunvegan, Skye, and farmed as a single unit; the famous stories of St Kilda involve Pabbay and its people. As the Macleod estate waned under financial strain, the stories of the islands dramatically diverged in the 19th century, St Kilda becoming a community of crofter–fowlers and Pabbay a lonely sheep farm cleared of 300 occupants. While St Kilda was lauded for its past and present from the 1860s onwards, Pabbay was cleared before tourism, photography and archaeology took hold and never attracted the same attention. The result, a sense that St Kilda is culturally and even archaeologically isolated, is an unwitting echo of the upheaval in the Outer Hebrides from the late 18th century. It should not be seen as the historical norm. This paper outlines the breadth and depth of the historical links before exploring the post-medieval archaeological landscapes, providing a description of Pabbay based on recent surveys. After exploring the way in which the two islands were alienated, the reasons behind this are explored, as are its effects. It is argued here that an understanding of the 'wider world' of St Kilda, at least in the post-medieval period, could begin with its closest and most important neighbour, Pabbay.*

INTRODUCTION

This article contests the understanding of the island group of Hiort (St Kilda) as a place with a unique history and archaeology. A specific comparison is drawn here with the large island of Pabaigh (Pabbay), which lies about 77km to the east and marks the western entrance to the Sound of Harris (Illus 1 & 2). Now without permanent occupants and rarely visited, Pabbay was owned and managed with St Kilda and it is the place with the strongest historical links; while St Kilda is certainly the most physically remote, Pabbay has been reduced to a footnote in most descriptions of St Kilda's archaeology, culture and people.[1] While it has been forcefully argued that St Kilda forms part of a 'wider world' with which there are more similarities than differences (Fleming 2005), the specifics of its relationship with Pabbay are explored here in detail for the first time.

St Kilda is described as 'the ultimate outlier' (Self 2000: 55), but despite its geographic remoteness it has benefited from a great swelling of attention and occupies a unique position in the United Kingdom as a UNESCO World Heritage site valued for both natural and cultural criteria. Much of the attention has been particular in its outlook, setting the islands apart from their region, placing the islanders apart from their nearest neighbours, and distancing the modern St Kilda (and its occupants) from a 'remote' past.

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ILLUS 1 (previous page) Map of the Western Isles of Scotland showing the location of St Kilda and Pabbay and selected other sites (GV009188 © HES)

ILLUS 2 Aerial view west over Ensay and Pabbay (centre) to St Kilda behind. (DP 417323 © G F Geddes)

On the one hand, the St Kilda literature rarely mentions sites within the parish or council area, while on the other the archipelago hardly receives a note in regional and national syntheses of archaeology (for example, Armit 1996; Edwards & Ralston 2003). Nonetheless, it holds a unique place in the Scottish public imagination, closely associated with Romantic ideas of a rural past that burgeoned in the 18th century (MacDonald 2001). The evacuation of the 36 St Kildans in August 1930 is now perceived as a tragedy of epic proportions, a final blow to a past that was somehow simpler, more pure and essentially better (Macgregor 1931; Fleming 2005; Gannon & Geddes 2015: 214–17). As Ralston (1997: 175) noted, 'the decline and eventual abandonment of St Kilda after the vicissitudes its inhabitants had suffered is a poignant story and an influential allegory on the state of Scotland in the first half of the twentieth century'. St Kilda is now occupied by a small military base with origins in the Cold War, is subject to a rigorous regime of archaeological monitoring and conservation, and has been visited by about 5,000 tourists each year since 2015 (National Trust for Scotland 2022: 49).

With some notable exceptions, the story of St Kilda is portrayed in the popular press with a certain naivety. We are led to believe that it was occupied by the 'unique and hardy Kildians' whose way of life set them apart from other inhabitants of the Outer Hebrides (Visit Scotland 2023). In *The Life and Death of St Kilda*, first published in 1965 but still the most popular general history of the islands, Tom Steel emphasised a particular perspective:

> St Kilda was unique. It stood in the Atlantic, the changeless amid the changed. All that could be done was to wait and allow the men and woman of Village Bay the courtesy and privilege of making for themselves the decision that would make Nature's defeat of man a reality (Steel 1965: 126).

The sense that St Kilda's evacuation was inevitable is coupled with the idea that the islanders were as unique as the island itself – a people at the whim of nature, with a culture that remained

unchanged over the centuries. Other writers have taken this idea further, imagining a 'once … forgotten culture' (Williamson & Boyd 1960: 67). The thread can be traced to the present day: 'St Kilda represents subsistence economies everywhere – living off the resources of land and sea … until external pressures led to decline and … the abandonment of the islands' (National Trust for Scotland 2010: 16; 2012: 10; 2022: 56; UNESCO 2024).

The islanders and their home assume the position of symbolic survivors of an ancient folk, whose lifestyle was in harmony with nature and ruined only by external pressures. An important adjunct to this narrative is the exclusion of other parts of the Hebrides, particularly the Outer Hebrides, from the narrative, despite the fact that most small islands were abandoned in the historical period, a pattern that continued until as recently as 1953 for Soay, Skye (Gannon & Geddes 2015: 214–17). In contrast, the island of Pabbay, 'once the granary of Harris' (Heron 1794: 21), and 'the most important of [Scotland's] *papar* islands' (Crawford 2005), has fallen to a position as a relative unknown. It is usually a footnote in St Kilda studies.

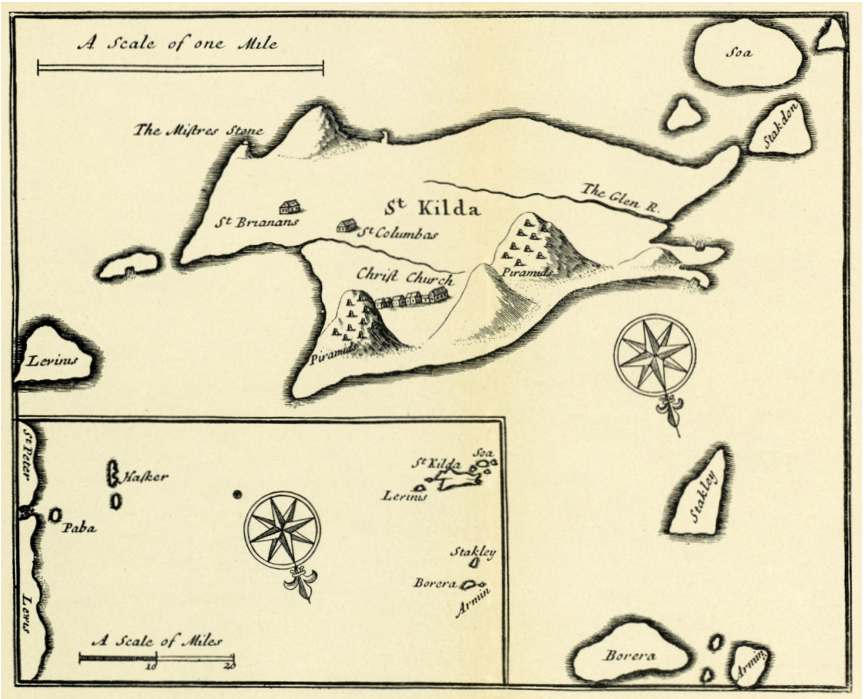
This paper looks first at the way in which St Kilda has been drawn in and out of comparative analyses since the 17th century, providing examples demonstrating that the local context, particularly of the post-medieval Gaelic cultural landscape of the Macleods, has often been underplayed (but see Fleming 2005). Following this, it sets out the case for re-examining the relationship of St Kilda with Pabbay, looking first at the links illuminated through historical documents, and secondly at the post-medieval field archaeology of the islands. This is followed by a narrative that describes the historical events that divorced St Kilda and Pabbay, and a discussion and conclusion that examine the longstanding and wide-ranging effects of that schism.

COMPARING THE INCOMPARABLE?

Comparative analysis has been relatively rare in literature on St Kilda, but a small number of regional travelogues have at least drawn the reader's attention to analogous islands. In a close reading of Martin Martin's travel guide-cum-anthropologies of St Kilda and the Western Isles (Martin 1698; 1703) the regional similarities shine through beside the peculiarities, his account describing 'a hard way of life, not obviously dissimilar to the lifeways in other parts of the Hebrides' (Fleming 1999: 191). 'Paba' is carefully illustrated on the small-scale inset which accompanied his detailed map of St Kilda (Martin 1698), indicating its prominent position at the entrance to the Sound of Harris but also hinting at the cultural link (Illus 3). Some later writers, particularly those that were well travelled in the region, also place St Kilda among its more obvious bedfellows, giving equal attention to other Atlantic islands (Atkinson 1949; Williamson & Boyd 1963).

But the fashion in the late 1990s and 2000s was to set St Kilda not only in its regional context but to add national and global dimensions. One encyclopaedic book, born from long familiarity with the island, offered Tristan da Cunha in comparison (Harman 1997: 284–6), placing geography, rather than economy, culture or climate, at the heart of an assessment. But Harman also noted that 'the occupation and evacuation of St Kilda are … part of an historic trend for the establishment of … self-sufficient settlements followed by a retreat to a smaller number of larger islands', as well as listing some of those nearer neighbours – Pabbay among them – that could have also been considered in more detail but were not (Harman 1997: 304).[2]

In July 2005 St Kilda's status as a cultural World Heritage site was upgraded on the basis of a revised nomination and an analysis developed by the National Trust for Scotland (Scottish Executive 2003; Scottish Executive & National Trust for Scotland 2005; Turner 2005). Examples of comparative landscapes were drawn from sites within Scotland and Ireland, the north-west frontiers of Europe, and the world, and each subjected to a comparative analysis summarised in three tables (Scottish Executive & National Trust for Scotland 2005: 25, 29, 33). An assessment was made of qualities such as documentation,



ILLUS 3 Martin's 1698 map of St Kilda singles out 'Paba' and 'Hasker' (the latter an unwelcoming rock). (DP 214156 © Courtesy of HES)

remoteness and isolation, and scored between 'exceptional' and 'none'. The Faeroe Islands, to take one example, were described as 'much less isolated in terms of trade and communications, and therefore more in tune with regional society, culture and traditions' (Scottish Executive & National Trust for Scotland: 33). Perhaps Fuglø (Fugloy) or Myggenæs (Mykines), small islands on the fringe of the Faroes, might have been more suitable as their economy was based on fowling (Williamson 1948: 143–67; Kjørsvik Schei & Moberg 2003: 145, 200).

In questioning the inclusion of sites that had no obvious parallel other than their natural environment or geographic remoteness, it is important to recognise that the current state of research played a part. With no ready transport links, thorough archaeologies of many of the similar, small, often uninhabited, islands in the Outer Hebrides or north-west Europe are rare, and 'much has been written on the historical and cultural development of the Western Isles before all the islands within this archipelago have been fully studied' (Colls & Hunter 2010: 36). That said, it is surprising that no sites within the same estate (Macleod) or parish (Harris) were mentioned, particularly given the ongoing research at the time which brought to the fore 'the wider world' (Fleming 2005) and included a prescient discussion of Pabbay (Fleming 1999: 194–5), although the Pictish stone referred to belongs to another Pabbay (Barra). A more recent analysis, mainly focused on later prehistoric St Kilda, does draw out the importance of links to the owners and tacksmen who managed the island (Harden & Lelong 2011: 194) but those links remain unexplored, and Pabbay and its occupants go without mention.

One final example serves to emphasise the problem. A well-argued review of the pictorial and archaeological evidence for St Kilda's early 19th-century and pre-improvement township makes no mention of comparative sites (Fleming 2004), although there are more than

95 townships in Harris and more than 590 in the Outer Hebrides (Gannon & Geddes 2015: 70, 74–6). Many of the older townships share comparable features to those identified on St Kilda (particularly the close relationship of the chapel and burial ground with nucleated township buildings), and a wider comparison would have served to strengthen the argument (cf Gannon & Geddes 2015: 70, 74–7).

The omission of the local context of parish and estate from most descriptions of St Kilda reflects a stark reality. Between 1750 and 1850, the economic, social, cultural and religious world of the Outer Hebrides was turned on its head. The other offshore islands of the parish of Harris, such as Ensay, Killegray, Pabbay and Taransay, which were once at the heart of the Harris economy and culture, were set adrift by devastating depopulation as they were reconfigured from joint-tenanted townships to farms with a single tenant. The Macleod estate become bankrupt, and the ancestral lands of Harris and Glenelg were sold. St Kilda too lost many of its population to disease in 1727, and to emigration in 1852 (Harman 1997; Robson 2005; Gannon & Geddes 2015: 77, 97), but the essential nature of its occupancy as a joint-tenanted township remained the same until 1930, surviving much longer than most comparable communities.

By dint of sale, reorganisation and 'improvement', cultural connections and practices, transport links and economic relationships were severed and disrupted where once they were resilient and adaptive. Crucially, many islands and townships like Pabbay had been abandoned before the discipline of archaeology developed from the 1860s (Sharples 2015), the period that also witnessed an uptick of visitors to St Kilda as steam travel became more common, with regular tourist steamers from the 1870s (Harman 1997: 108; Mackay 2006). Archaeologies of St Kilda have in general downplayed this schism and, with some notable exceptions, they have not recognised that St Kilda's apparent isolation is not at all the historical norm. This, in turn, has affected the way that St Kilda's landscape and buildings have been understood as 'apart' from their cultural (and geographic) neighbours.

HISTORICAL LINKS BETWEEN ST KILDA AND PABBAY

From long before 1549 until 1779 St Kilda formed part of the hereditary estate of Clan Macleod, which covered almost 400,000 acres of Skye, Harris and Glenelg (Harman 1997; Macleod 1939: 69). The island and parish of Harris, of which St Kilda was an outlier, was at that time separated into more than 20 farms located on five islands, each of which was let to a tacksmen (a middle-class farmer) from whom the majority of the population of up to 2,500 people held their land (Macleod 1794: 384; McKay 1980: 53–6). The rental of St Kilda was generally held by a tacksman (also known as the 'Steward' of St Kilda) along with one or more of the farms on Pabbay, well known as the most fertile island in the area, with a reputation as 'the granary of Harris' (Macleod 1794: 344; Morrison 1969: 47–8; 1981; Dodgshon 1998: 33; Dodgshon 2004).

The island of Pabbay appears in documentary evidence as early as the 14th century AD, retaining a particular importance into the 16th or 17th century. It was there that the 2nd and 6th chiefs of Clan Macleod are said to have died ('Mac Ian' 1880; Mackenzie 1899: 14; Macleod 1927: 34, 66, 82; Mackinnon & Morrison 1968a: 10), while the Macleod chiefs had 'an extraordinarily inconvenient abode' on Pabbay until at least the 16th century (Grant 1959: 83, 247, 270, passim). The ownership of St Kilda before the 17th century is not fully documented, but it too came under Macleod ownership from long before the mid-16th century, when it was noted that it was owned by Macleod of Harris 'of auld' (Harman 1997: 80–1; Robson 2005: 30).

From at least the 17th century Pabbay and St Kilda were farmed together by successive generations of the Clann Alasdair Ruadh, the Macleods of Pabbay and St Kilda, an important local family (Mackinnon & Morrison 1968a: 199; Lawson 1994: 9–10; Harman 1997: 95–6), who presumably adopted the role of lead family on Pabbay from the Macleod chiefs. The story of Clann Alasdair Ruadh is closely intertwined with four of the most well-known events in St Kildan

history. Around 1689, it was the Pabbay tacksman who was blown off course to North Rona while returning from St Kilda, surviving against the odds (Mackinnon & Morrison 1968a: 205–6); in 1695 Martin Martin's three-week visit to St Kilda happened while the tacksman was there, surely an influential factor for his account (Harman 1997: 86); in 1728 the tacksman led the rescue of the St Kildan survivors from Stac an Armin where they had spent a miserable winter (Harman 1997: 88); and in 1734, a Pabbay man took Lady Grange to St Kilda for her well-known incarceration (Mackinnon & Morrison 1968a: 205–6, 215; Harman 1997: 96). In each of these cases, Macleod of Pabbay was at the heart of St Kildan affairs. While their names and the broad outline of their history are known, they are usually referred to simply as 'the Steward', making them appear anonymous. An article from 1763, rare in that it mentions a high-status woman, describes how Elizabeth Macleod, a 'gentlewoman distinguished from severals for piety and good morals' and mother-in-law to St Kilda's minister, came out of her house in Pabbay and witnessed a premonition of death concerning a St Kildan domestic girl, sharing the story with 'the other servants' (Insulanus 1763: 18).

In 1773 the last of the Macleod tacksmen emigrated from Pabbay to North Carolina in response to the increase in rents proposed by the failing Macleod estate (Mackinnon & Morrison 1968a: 229; Robson 2005: 277). Only six years later the Macleod's Harris estate failed, and it was sold to Captain Alexander Macleod of Berneray, a second son of one of the main cadet families and apparently an enlightened benefactor (Knox 1787: 158–60; *The Bee, or Literary Intelligencer* 1792: 280; Mackinnon & Morrison 1968b: 55–8; Daniell 2006, vol 1: 190–1; Geddes 2016). In 1804 St Kilda was alienated from the remainder of the Harris estate (including Pabbay) and, despite another period of ownership by the Macleods of Skye from 1871 until 1931, it has never again been owned with any land in Harris (Mackenzie 1899: 181; *contra* Harman 1997: 99). After the Macleods of Pabbay departed in 1773 the role of tacksman and steward was taken over by William MacNeil (Lawson 1994: 19), whose right to manage St Kilda was challenged in court in 1805, with the new owners of St Kilda proving victorious (Fraser-Mackintosh 1897: 299–300; Harman 1997: 96–101; Robson 2005: 229). In the early decades of the 19th century St Kilda had a confusing succession of tacksmen, though the role seems to have become that of an estate factor by the 1840s as the traditional structure of tacksmen broke down, a position held subsequently by three individuals (Harman 1997: 102, 110–12). In 1931 St Kilda was once again sold, this time to the Marquis of Bute, and it was bequeathed to the National Trust for Scotland in 1956.

After 1779 Pabbay continued to form part of the estate of Harris, passing through inheritance to the descendants of Captain Macleod, his son Alexander Hume (formerly Macleod) (d 1812) and his grandson Alexander Norman Macleod (d 1834), before being sold as part of the estate to the 5th Earl of Dunmore in 1834 (Elton 1938; Mackinnon & Morrison 1968b: 76, 96). The MacNeils continued as tacksmen on Pabbay until the clearances of the 1840s (Lawson 1994: 20). Pabbay was finally alienated from the Harris estate in 1865, when it was purchased by John Stewart of Ensay, a descendant of Harris estate factor Donald Stewart (*The Oban Times*, 25 March 1899: 5) who is notorious for the eviction of crofters from the west coast of Harris (Lawson 2002: 5, 8; Robson 2005: 290; Kerr 2011; Ralph 2017: 154–5). Still used as a sheep farm and deer park by a Stewart in 1933 (Macgregor 1933: 111, 118), the island was sold to the Campbells of Rodel in 1934 and finally in 1974 to David Plunkett and Donald Ogilvie-Watson (Haswell-Smith 2008: 268), whose successors remain in ownership (M Ansell pers comm).

While the broader historical narrative presented above demonstrates that Pabbay and St Kilda were inextricably linked, and that significant events of the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries should be viewed through that prism, debate has usually focused instead on the dominant narrative accounts of St Kilda, whether Martin (1698), Macaulay (1764) or Mackenzie (1911).

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF ST KILDA AND PABBAY

SURVIVAL AND DESTRUCTION

The landscape and soils of these islands are of paramount importance to their human story. Hirta (6.7km^2), the principal island of St Kilda, is precipitous and craggy with a complex volcanic geology of gneiss and gabbro. The land is in general of poor quality and the infield (extending up to 2km^2) has, therefore, been significantly enhanced by deepening the soils and adding fertiliser (Meharg et al 2006; Donaldson et al 2009; Gannon & Geddes 2015: 77). The best area for permanent settlement and agriculture, Village Bay, may well have been the focus for millennia, given the natural constraints of topography, water, soils and light (Illus 4).

While the north-west of Pabbay (8.2km^2, 22% larger than Hirta) is also rocky and cliff-girt, and the underlying rock is also granite, a fertile sandy soil covers much of the south-east part of the island, and cultivation remains extend over at least 3.9km^2 (95% more than Hirta). It is likely that further archaeological sites will be discovered among the extensive and now stable dunes between Baile Lingay and Seana Chaisteal, the ground having been buried in documented periods of sand inundation that cover up to 300 acres (1.2km^2) (McKay 1980: 54), an area roughly equivalent to what can be mapped from vertical aerial photographs (Illus 5).

THE ANTIQUARIAN TRADITION

St Kilda was visited by two early students of Hebridean archaeology, T S Muir and F W L Thomas, in 1858 and 1860 respectively (Muir 1861; Muir & Thomas 1862; Thomas 1869; Muir 1885; Gannon & Geddes 2015: 20). Wider-reaching early summaries of St Kilda's archaeology tend to confuse and conflate structures of different dates, the authors being a journalist, a minister and a surveyor respectively (Sands 1878; Mackenzie 1905; Mathieson 1928). These forays were supplemented by professional assessments (RCAHMS 1928: xx, xxi, liv, 46–7, No. 158; Davidson 1967), although the most detailed archaeological account until quite recently came through a major study by two naturalists (Williamson & Boyd 1960). Programmes of

Illus 4 Aerial view of the crofting township at Hirte, St Kilda. (DP 134218 © Crown Copyright: HES)

ILLUS 5 Map of Pabbay. (GV 009073 © HES)

excavation and survey developed from the late 1970s (Cottam 1979; Stell & Harman 1988; Emery 1996; Harman 1997; Fleming 2005; Harden & Lelong 2011; Gannon & Geddes 2015).

Pabbay has had relatively little in the way of archaeological investigation, in large part because it has been uninhabited and difficult of access since the 1840s. Four antiquities were noted during the survey of 1878 (Ordnance Survey Inverness-shire (Hebrides) Sheet XXII, 1881), while a visit in 1914 noted the presence of another cairn (RCAHMS 1928: 45, No. 148). In 1965 the Ordnance Survey recorded monuments for a revised map, but the first modern evaluation came as part of the Papar Project, an attempt to acquire a better understanding of Scottish islands with the *papar* name (Old Norse: 'priest' or 'monk') (Crawford 2005; Crawford & Simpson 2008). The project website notes that Pabbay is 'perhaps the most impressive example of the "papar" islands, in respect of its importance as a historic power centre in the centre of the Outer

Hebridean chain of islands' (Papar Project, Chapter H2: 9). Auger survey to the north of the church demonstrated the existence of widespread anthropogenic soils at least 0.8m thick, usually under an overburden of wind-blown sand averaging 0.4m in depth. While these were not dated, and may be associated with settlement as well as agriculture, they demonstrate that the archaeological landscape in and near the church is at least partially sand-covered, those visible cultivation remains in the wider area being 19th century in date. Pabbay was not included in the survey of Harris undertaken by Colls & Hunter (2010; 2015), which demonstrated the broader potential of the parish, and the relatively limited foray by Crawford and her team simply concluded: 'That little more can be said about the archaeology of Pabaigh appears to reflect the lack of recent work, rather than the island's potential' (Papar Project, Chapter H2: 8).

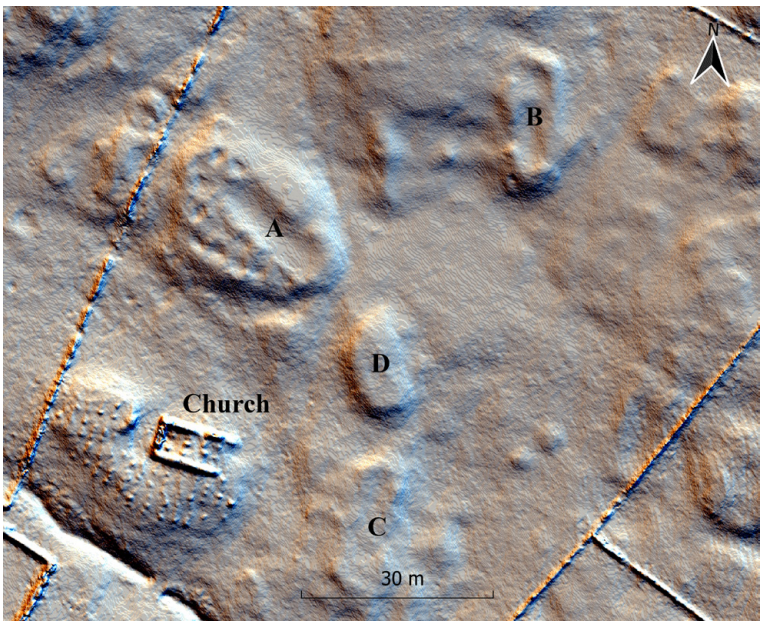
MEDIEVAL

St Kilda has long been considered an ideal location for an early medieval eremitic site due to its remote situation and the presence of dedications to the 6th-century saints Brendan and Columba (Harden & Lelong 2011: 177–8). The evidence is thus far restricted to three cross-incised stones, two of which have been typologically dated to between the 8th and 10th centuries AD (Fisher 2001: 3, 8, 113–14; Gannon & Geddes 2015: 47). Occupation by Norse settlers is attested by place-name evidence, stray diagnostic finds which included a pair of brooches, and the recent discovery of midden material dating from the 10th to the 13th centuries AD (Harden & Lelong 2011: 47). Late medieval St Kilda may have sported as many as six chapels, perhaps part of a pilgrimage route, but none have been securely located despite extensive research (Gannon & Geddes 2015: 51–4, 56). Other medieval features may include head-dykes, an unusual suite of shielings, and fragments of cellular buildings subsequently modified for use as storehouses (Stell & Harman 1988; Fleming 2005; Gannon & Geddes 2015: 51–65; Geddes 2019).

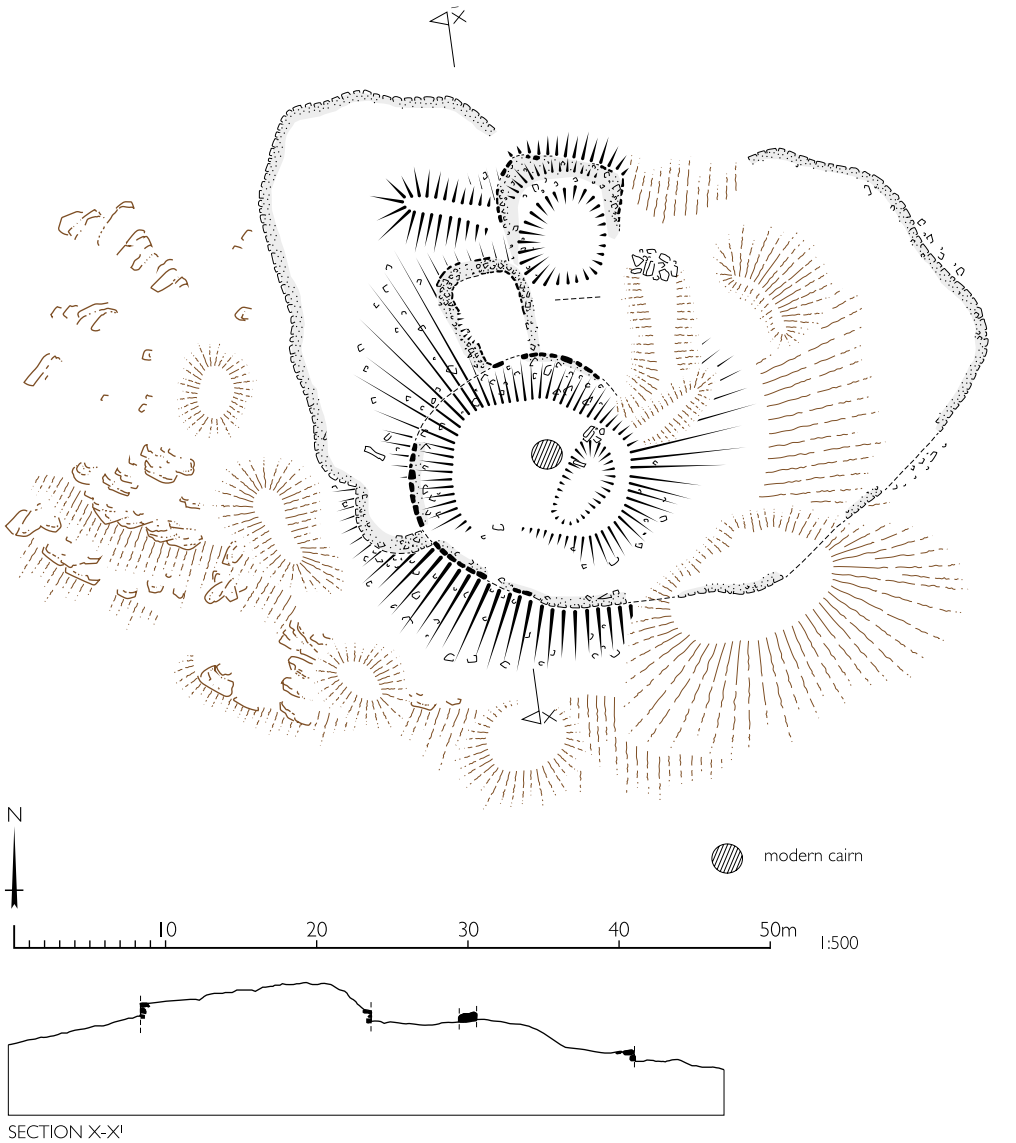
Although no early medieval archaeological evidence has been uncovered on Pabbay, the late medieval (*c* AD 1200–1600) features include the extant church, chapel and burial ground at Baile na Cille. The contrast of these upstanding features with the ephemeral traces and rebuilt burial ground on St Kilda is marked. The church of Teampull Mhoire (Illus 6; Canmore ID 10380), possibly early 16th century in date (Miers 2008: 386), may have played an important role for Clan Macleod prior to the cessation of high-status activity on Pabbay before 1700, although its relationship to the famous 16th-century church at Rodel (Canmore ID 10521) is unknown. Teampull Beag on Pabbay (Canmore ID 10381), adjacent to the church, is traditionally described as a chapel, but it could simply be an antecedent church or a late medieval burial aisle. Secular late medieval buildings almost certainly survive among more than 80 ruinous buildings on the island, but they are often difficult to distinguish given the lack of typological markers. The most likely candidate is situated about 30m NNE of the church, where there is a rectangular building (A), clearly earlier than the majority of the visible buildings on Pabbay (Illus 7). It measures about 15m from north-east to south-west by 4m transversely within a grass-grown wall 2m thick. There is an entrance in the north-east wall, near the south-east end, and a series of at least seven pits up to 2m in diameter, possibly for storage, are arranged immediately to the west and north-west. The location and character of this building clearly mark it out as unusual. At least three other grass-grown buildings stand in the same modern fenced plot north-east of the church, each of pre-improvement character (Illus 7). The first (B), 60m north-east of the church, measures up to 21m from north to south by 9.5m overall and has two compartments; the second (C), 19m south-east of the church, is of similar size. A fourth smaller building (D) lies between B and C.

The late medieval caput of the Macleods is almost certainly to be identified with Seana Chaisteal (the old castle, see Illus 8). This Iron Age broch is partially buried in sand and its interior is inundated up to a height exceeding 1.3m

ILLUS 6 Teampull Mhoire (left) and Teampull Beag (right), Pabbay, in 1914. (SC 1304003 © Crown Copyright: HES)



ILLUS 7 Hillshade visualisation of a digital surface model showing the church and buildings at Baile na Cille, Pabbay. (DP 345054 © HES)



ILLUS 8 Plan of the broch and medieval buildings at Seana Chaisteal, Pabbay. (GV 007620 © HES)

(Canmore ID 10474). There are at least two round-ended rectangular buildings abutting it on the north, the better preserved of which measures 5.8m by 4m internally. These buildings, though relatively small, are comparable with those surveyed at high-status medieval sites elsewhere (cf RCAHMS 1984: 275–81, No. 404), as well as the buildings at Dun an Sticer (Canmore ID 10294) – they may well be the buildings associated with the Macleod chiefs up to the 16th century. Medieval shieling activity may be represented by shieling mounds on high ground now found within the expanded infield (Canmore ID 362337).

POST-MEDIEVAL

In practice it is features of the 18th and 19th centuries that dominate St Kilda and, given the lack

of development since the late 19th century, the landscape is one of the better-preserved crofting townships in Scotland, while the blackhouses are some of the most closely studied (Stell & Harman 1988; Emery 1996; Gannon & Geddes 2015: 100–2). The entire area of the township was surveyed by RCAHMS at 1:500 (Stell & Harman 1988), at that time their most ambitious survey at that scale, then digitised and fully checked by RCAHMS in 2008–9 (Gannon & Geddes 2015), facilitating a detailed analysis (Fleming 1995: 33–4; 2005; Geddes 2019). Typical examples of a kiln-barn, church, school, cottages, blackhouses and head-dykes are all evident, as well as a late 18th-century storehouse and tacksman's lodging (Geddes 2016) that, necessitated as it is by St Kilda's remoteness, is more unusual.

Unique components of the landscape are limited to those directly related to the exploitation of seabirds, including many of the numerous *cleitean* (small storage huts), small storage 'nooks' in hunting grounds, and the seasonal bothies in far-flung locations (Geddes & Watterson 2013; Gannon & Geddes 2015: 88–9). The *cleitean*, such an important element of St Kilda's landscape, were also used for other agricultural produce. Similar buildings, never in the same density, have been found elsewhere (Geddes & Watterson 2013; see also RCAHMS 1984: 78, No. 131). A further distinction, but one that takes longer to recognise, is in the management of fuel. The St Kildans exploited peat and turf for roofing, fuel and soil *in toto* over large areas, rather than focusing their efforts on certain peat banks. This means that peat hags are very rare, while they also constructed cleits to dry and protect peat and turf, a practice comparable to the use of peat stack stands on Mingulay (RCAHMS 2010) and North Rona (Canmore ID 1474, 1475 and 1476).

Many of the extant ruins on Pabbay are of late 18th- or early 19th-century date, reflecting a high population on the island before the islanders were evicted. Extensive areas of relict lazy bedding (*feannagan*) extend high up Beinn a' Chàrnain and probably reflect the expansion of potato cultivation in the 18th and 19th centuries. Other elements of the archaeological landscape suggest agricultural improvement rather than expansion, such as to the north of Baile na Cille, in the area marked Creag Thuiristein on OS maps, where there are four well-preserved croft farmsteads, each of which has a blackhouse with a yard, and one a detached kiln-barn (Canmore ID 318637 and 318638 and NGR: NF 8914 8751 and NF 8889 8722). Measured survey at one (Canmore ID 318637) indicated the presence of two window openings in the blackhouse, which is certainly of an improved type. All four are depicted unroofed on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Inverness-shire (Hebrides), sheet xxi, 1881).

The pattern of these croft farmsteads, aligned north-east and south-west and set out in a linear arrangement, can be seen to continue downhill towards the sea to Baile na Cille, where there are at least seven more croft farmsteads spread out over 370m, also shown unroofed on the 1881 OS map, two of which have a detached kiln-barn (Canmore ID 318629 and 318630). These better-preserved blackhouses are probably early 19th-century in date and represent a modification in the way the island was farmed with small crofts being created, either before, or at the same time, as those on St Kilda. Some of the other buildings at Baile na Cille, many of which are smaller, less well-preserved and aligned north and south (clusters at NF 8876 8680 and NF 8876 8680) are not depicted on the 1881 map. These may be cottars' houses, but most are perhaps remnants of the township that existed before the establishment of the crofts described above. If so, they present an interesting comparison to the pre-improvement township on St Kilda, so much of which has been removed.

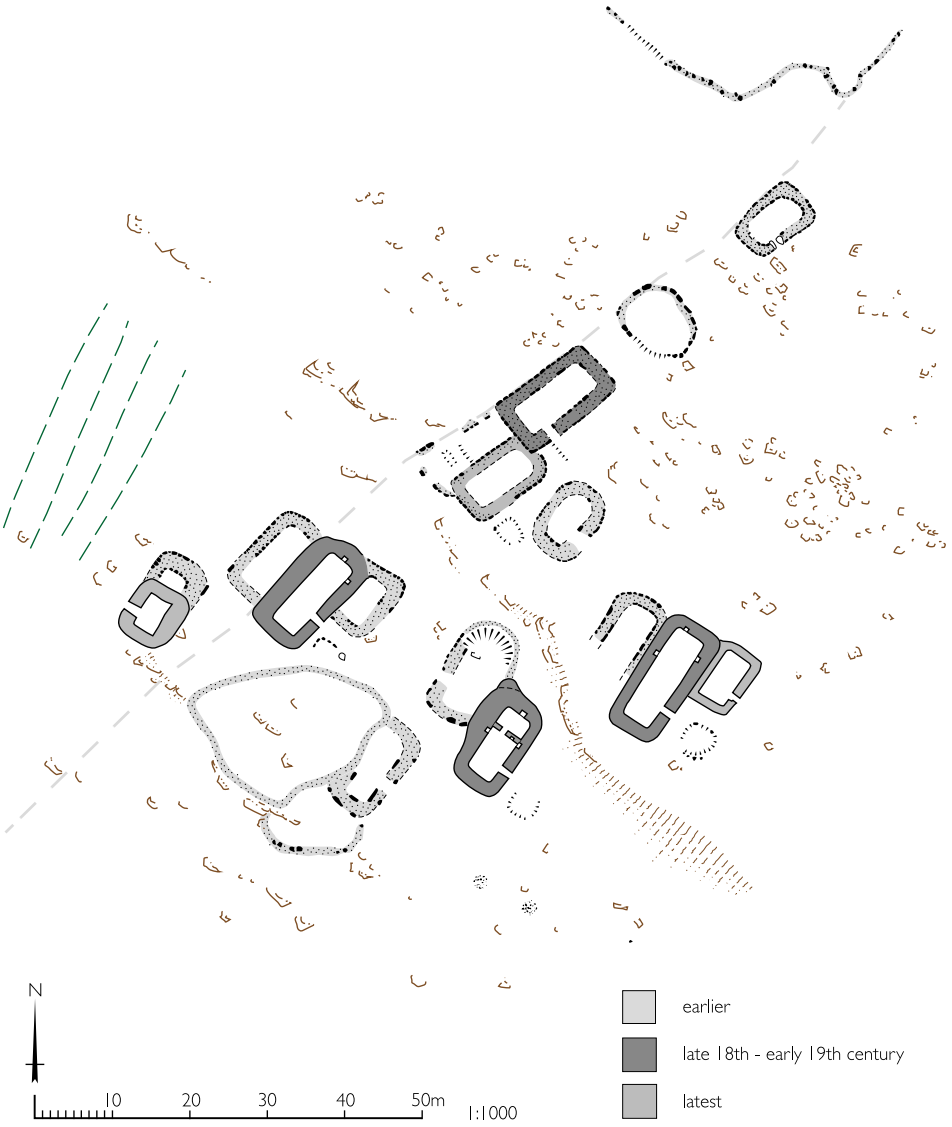
At Baile Lingay, the township respects the west edge of the wind-blown sand, but it is probably no coincidence that the buildings here are also planned. They are aligned north-east and south-west, regularly spaced, and have small, attached yards similar to those at Creag Thuiristein and Baile na Cille (Illus 9). Fourteen unroofed buildings are depicted on the 1881 map at Lingay. At least nine are croft farmsteads, occasionally with an ancillary building, but a group of at least four at the southern end of Baile Lingay (NGR:

Illus 9 Aerial view from the south of the township at Baile Lingay, Pabbay, showing the extent of wind-blown sand on the right. The township in Illus 10 is annotated 'A' (DP 296573 © HES)

NF 8940 8735) are less well preserved, aligned north-west to south-east, clustered near an enclosure and more varied in size and shape. These may represent the vestiges of Lingay before it was redeveloped into a crofting township and are perhaps the MacNeils' house (Lawson 1994). One blackhouse at Lingay (Canmore ID 362290) boasts a secondary mid-gable and fireplace, unusual features in this context.

A small township (Canmore ID 362291) on high ground to the north of the croft houses at Lingay is unusual in that it is set at the edge of the main areas of cultivation, albeit that it is now surrounded by lazy beds that are probably 19th century in date. It was selected for measured survey in 2019 and this demonstrated that the group of 15 structures, perhaps representing four families, included at least three phases (Illus 10). What was not noticed at the time is that the township overlies a head-dyke, running from north-east to south-west, that is depicted on William Bald's Map of Harris (1805). The township incorporates elements of the dyke in as many as six structures, with other sections having been robbed for stone. While the site description of 2019 identified the township as a response to the wind-blow that inundated Pabbay in the late 17th century, it is also possible that it is a settlement set up by cottars, those without formal tenancy agreements, or that it was founded during the period of clearances that extended over a number of years in the 1840s.

Most of the south-east half of Pabbay is enclosed in some way. The latest phase comprises a 63-hectare sheep park west and south-west of Baile na Cille that is enclosed within a drystone wall and post-dates the clearance of the township. The early 19th century arrangement is



Illus 10 Plan of the township at Baile Lingay (north), Pabbay. The old head-dyke is shown as a dashed grey line. (GV 007615 © HES)

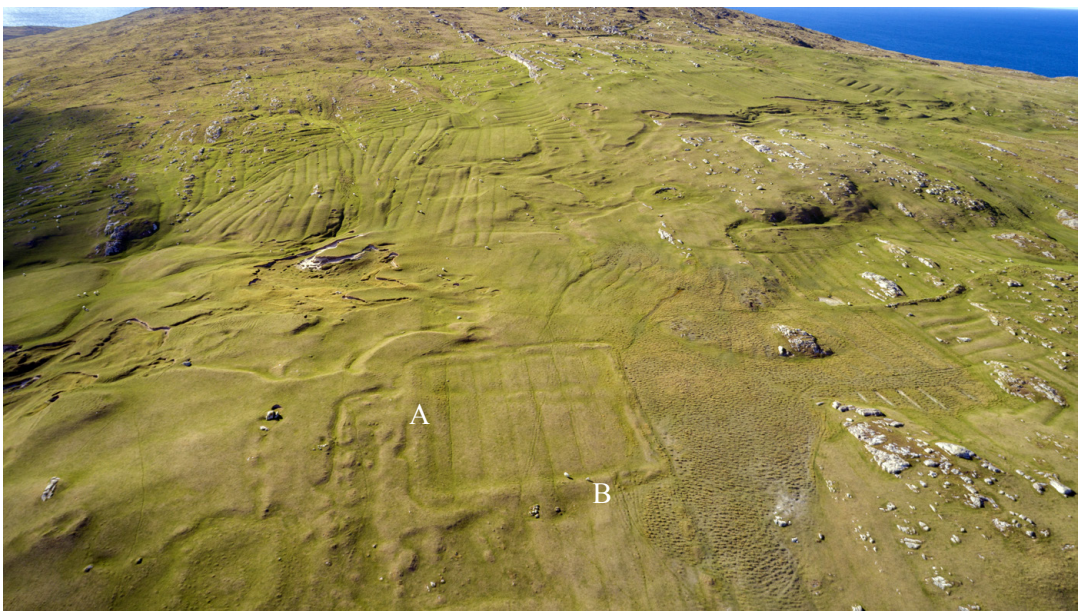
depicted on Bald's 1805 map which shows not only the dyke which dissects Beinn a' Chàrnain, but some of the intakes of lazy beds to the south-east and north-west of the Lingay Burn. At that time these plots fell within Baile Lingay, but the map also shows some of the dykes that divide up the ground on the south flank of Meahall which comprised the upper part of the lands of Baile na Cille. While these dyke-systems have been developed piecemeal, there is nothing to suggest that they are earlier than post-medieval in date. Of more interest are a series of embanked turf enclosures on the south-east flank of Beinn a' Chàrnain (Canmore ID 318797), most of which pre-date the latest phase of cultivation. At least six are visible on vertical and oblique aerial photographs,

each consisting of an enclosure measuring 40m to 50m square with an outer ditch and an inner bank, often associated with smaller enclosures (Illus 11). Comparisons might be sought at Killegray (Canmore ID 269194), Aird Nisabost, Harris (Canmore ID 10537, 269182 and 269183) and Leathad na Cruaich, Lewis (Canmore ID 331428). They may be related to tathing, the process of folding stock to manure future patches of arable (cf RCAHMS 2001) and are probably 18th century or earlier in date. Fragmentary field systems, of unknown date, are also visible among the blown sand (NGR: NF 9000 8741 and NF 9020 8731).

A series of rectilinear fields at Creag Thuiristein visible on aerial photographs (NGR: NF 8889 8758) must surely be examples of the 19th-century crofts that are recorded in the literature (Napier Commission 1884, vol 1: 840; Lawson 1994: 20), most not being formerly marked. While these attempts at agricultural improvement were cut short by the clearance of the island, the creation of a sheep farm brought with it the construction of new buildings and enclosures. The current shepherd's bothy (Canmore ID 362297) is an early 20th-century building with the mid-19th-century shepherd's house standing immediately behind it.

Two other elements of the landscape require mention. There are at least five locations where groups of oval storage pits survive (eg Canmore ID 318668). These reflect Pabbay's fame as a fertile island and may have been used as potato clamps or, if they reflect the island's association with whisky distilling (Lawson 1994: 23–5; Dodgshon 2004: nn47 and 76), grain pits. Post-medieval shielings on the island are represented by small groups of well-preserved huts on the high ground (Canmore ID 312646, 312657 and 318620).

The archaeological features of St Kilda and Pabbay are broadly comparable, each reflecting the wider traditions of the region in the survival of elements from prehistory through to more recent periods. St Kilda's landscape differs in three striking respects. Firstly, the focus of the



Illus 11 Aerial view from the south-east of the tathing folds, enclosures and later cultivation remains on the south-east flank of Beinn a' Chàrnain, Pabbay. The nearest fold overlies another (at A) and is partially ploughed down (at B). (DP 296602 © Crown Copyright: HES)

islanders in later years on fowling has led to a unique concentration of *cleitean* and bothies used by fowlers and small structures associated with fowling – the landscapes at Carn Mòr and Stac an Armin are truly exceptional in Scotland (Gannon & Geddes 2015: 86–8). Secondly, the mid–late 19th-century crofting landscape of St Kilda (*c* 1830–60) is particularly well preserved, having had less in the way reconstruction and development after abandonment than other crofting townships. Thirdly, the way in which fuel (that is peat and turf) was managed and exploited can only really be compared with other remote islands with limited peat reserves, such as North Rona and Mingulay. The peat stack stands identified by RCAHMS on both are mirrored in the *cleitean* used for peat on St Kilda, but peat and turf exploitation on St Kilda seems to have been extensive, with very large areas reduced wholescale, and recognisable features like hags being very rare.

Pabbay too has significant and well-preserved components. As Barbara Crawford and her colleagues noted (Crawford & Simpson 2008: 12), the island had particular importance as a power centre for the Macleods before *c* 1700, represented in the survival of a medieval church and the remains of the caput at Seana Chaisteal, as well as what are likely tacksmen's houses of the 17th and 18th centuries at Baile Lingay and Baile na Cille. It also contains a relatively rich suite of post-medieval remains which in general date to the 18th and early 19th centuries (cf Fleming 2004) and include elements indicative of careful stock and arable management (the tathing folds) and an early attempt at the introduction of crofting, as well a diverse suite of vernacular buildings. There is specialisation here too, whether in tathing folds or in storage pits, emphasising that each archaeological landscape echoes the strengths and weaknesses of the economic base.

DIVERGING PATHS

As described in the historical section above, the close links between St Kilda and Pabbay began to break down in the early 19th century. From 1804 and 1805 respectively, the islands were in separate ownership and management, but the cultural links remained for many years: the Reverend Neil Mackenzie, who went on to be deeply involved in the improvement of St Kilda's housing and agricultural affairs, set out from Pabbay in June 1830, having lodged in the house of the former tacksman (Kennedy 1867: 12; Mackenzie 1911; Robson 2005: 316). Around the same time it was recorded that 'The St Kilda tacksman usually takes a boat from Pabba when he pays his biennial visits, both from it being a few miles nearer, and independent of the rocky navigation of the Sound, and because the people of Pabba [sic] boats and men are better adapted for the purpose – moreover it is the near next habitable point to St Kilda' (Atkinson 1831, quoted in Quine 2001: 74).

Both islands were profoundly affected by a move towards agricultural improvement. While these changes began with the attempts of Macleod of Macleod to forestall the sale of the estate in 1769 (Macleod 1939: 72–3) and took a firmer grip with Captain Macleod's focus on fishing, with works at Rodel and on St Kilda in the 1780s (Geddes 2016), they took further hold after 1804. Captain Macleod's descendants embraced his approach in the late 18th century (Macleod 1794: 359–61), focusing the estate on the harvesting of kelp, his son rejoicing that the shores of the estate were 'lined with silver' (Mackinnon & Morrison 1968b: 75). Crofts were certainly introduced to Harris and Pabbay by the early 19th century, the small nature of the holdings essentially tying the families to seasonal kelping to provide an income (Hunter 2000: 49–71; Lawson 2002: 7–8). As the value of kelp collapsed (Grant 2019: 64), so the estate's owners and factors turned their attention to the possibility of developing sheep farms (MacIvor 1841: 157). The Harris factors of the early 19th century are now notorious – individuals like Duncan Shaw, Donald Stewart and John Robertson Macdonald had negative associations, Stewart in particular being described at the time as 'a wretch' (Ralph 2017: 154). Over the next 20 or 30 years every township on Harris underwent reorganisation (Caird 1951: 93), and 'by the 1840s there were no people on the machair except

a few sheep farmers and their servants' (Lawson 2002: xii). People were eventually removed even from the best land, the Rev Alex Davidson noting that 'there is no place in Harris, for grain and crop, like the island of Pabbay', once 'filled with a crofter population' (Napier Commission 1884, vol 2: 839, 849).

On St Kilda, the agricultural land was broken up into crofts during the 1830s, while the houses were improved at the same time (Gannon & Geddes 2015: 100–2). A new head-dyke was constructed to enclose a smaller area of land, while each of the new houses was fitted with a small window. This crofting landscape remains as testament to a revolutionary period of change, with alterations after the middle of the 19th century being relatively small and piecemeal (Stell & Harman 1988: 4, 7).

As with the remainder of Harris, the situation on Pabbay was to drastically change. The island's population of 65 households was reduced to just six between 1841 and 1851, apparently at the request of the factor of Harris, John Robertson Macdonald of Rodel (Napier Commission 1884, vol 2: 1195; Lawson 1994: 25), acting for the 6th Earl of Dunmore (Alexander Murray, d 1845, succeeded by his widow Catherine). Clearance of Baile Lingay in 1843 and Baile na Cille in 1846 (Lawson 1994: 25) paved the way for a sheep farm represented by well-built drystone dykes, sheepfolds, a sheep dip and a shepherd's house. The loss of more than 300 people from Pabbay during the 1840s, and their relocation to other parts of the Outer Hebrides, Australia and Canada (Lawson 1994: 40–3) must surely be counted a more poignant tragedy than St Kilda's evacuation, which was, after all, by request. Such was the effect of Pabbay's clearances that it was mentioned a number of times in evidence to the Napier Commission given at Leverburgh, some 40 years after the events described (Napier Commission 1884, vol 1: 838–41, 845).

DISCUSSION

> … your Hirt may be the island to look at, but Pabba is the island to dwell in (Muir 1861: 224).

During the same period that Muir was writing, the shepherd Neil Morrison lived on Pabbay, where he composed some of the Gaelic verse which brought him the name *Am Bard Pabbaich* (the Pabbay Bard) (Henderson 1898: 43–8). Much of his work takes the form of a dirge imbued with sadness and loneliness. He writes of 'the black isle of Pabbay' and a 'long winter of little company', describing his view to a St Kilda 'so close that I can see the ploughing of the people there' (Lawson 1994: 30–1), perhaps calling to mind the end of Pabbay's story as the 'granary of Harris' and contrasting it with the relatively meagre, but continuing, agrarian output of Hirta. His reflective voice brings the stark reality of Pabbay's recent history into close focus, contrasting with a 17th-century poem where Mary Macleod looked 'towards Hirt of blue birds …' (Watson 1934: 7; Robson 2005: 9).

One question to ask is why the stories of St Kilda and Pabbay diverged so markedly. The answer may lie in their economic value. During the period of the clearances in Harris, Neil Mackenzie (the St Kilda minister from 1830 to 1844) noted that the rent of St Kilda was paid 'principally in feathers' (Mackenzie 1911: 16). His sponsor the Rev Dr McDonald also noted that 'feathers chiefly pay the rents' (Kennedy 1867: 146; see also Wilson 1842 (2): 26; Harman 1997: 100). Between 1793 and 1841 (the decades of Pabbay's clearance), there was a tenfold increase in the weight of feathers exported (up to 240 stones or 1.9 metric tonnes), while they remained a key part of the rent through to the 1860s (Macleod 1814: 912; Harman 1997: 100). The evidence is not only historical – the huge number of *cleitean*, many of which are still roofed, and the concentration of building on Stac an Armin (Canmore ID 314183), may indicate a reliance on the fowling economy. There seems little doubt that the value of feathers helped to protect the St Kildans from the dramatic changes related to kelp, crofting and sheep farming seen elsewhere in the Outer Hebrides. Pabbay was to suffer as well from the richness of the land that had sustained such a large farming population – it was, from the perspective of a land manager, an ideal place for a sheep farm:

> It would afford matter of astonishment to most persons residing in agricultural districts, to be informed that an island a mile in diameter, one-third of which is covered by sand, and at least a sixth by bare rock, while the vegetation on the remaining part is never four inches high, should maintain two hundred black cattle, a hundred horses, and four or five hundred sheep, and yet this has been the case with the island of Pabbay (Macgillivray 1830: 94–5; see also Ralph 2017: 94).

CONCLUSION

We have looked at the way in which St Kilda has been presented in archaeological literature in the 20th century, and how comparative analysis of the islands has tended to downplay the landscapes of the Macleods, and rarely mention Pabbay. The historical connections between St Kilda and Pabbay have been summarised, demonstrating the powerful and longstanding connections between the islands into the early 19th century. The field archaeology has been explored, juxtaposing the archaeology of St Kilda, which has been thoroughly surveyed, partially excavated and comprehensively described, with that of Pabbay, where study has barely begun. Both islands exhibit a wealth of archaeological remains, with Pabbay's post-medieval landscape in particular one of a similar depth and breadth to St Kilda's. Recent research is demonstrating that St Kilda in the post-medieval period was a dynamic and responsive community (Fleming 2005; Geddes & Grant 2015; Grant 2016; 2019). Pabbay should be seen in the same light.

The survival of the St Kilda's community after the introduction of crofting in the 1830s and the destruction of Pabbay's in the 1840s laid the foundations for narratives of the past that isolate St Kilda and forget Pabbay. By the 1870s, when steamships provided regular access to St Kilda, photographers began to capture the islanders' lives and archaeologists began to explore the ruins, Pabbay was a lonely shepherd's outpost. This divergence in history has helped to support the idea of St Kilda as an iconic, isolated island, and of the islanders as a unique people.

Writers have sometimes reinforced rather than challenged these notions of St Kilda as isolated and unique and have often written Pabbay out of the narrative, simply unaware of the strength of the cultural and economic ties before the clearances. The most troubling aspect of this is the sense that we are not acting here as 'handmaidens of history' (Hume 1964) but are continually reinforcing a narrative of St Kilda as an *ultima Thule* (Jacobsen 2015: 220). At its most worrying, this approach creates archaeologies that are a simulacrum of mid-19th-century actions – an island cleared of its population before steamers, photographers and archaeologists appear gets little attention, while one that retained its population through the age of burgeoning travel gains a totemic quality which affects research and management.

The similarities between St Kilda and Pabbay are striking both in their archaeology and in their history. Most features are shared, and both host post-medieval remains that indicate dynamism, specialisation and agricultural improvement right up to the 1840s. St Kilda's crofting landscape of 1830–60 is well preserved, but so too is Pabbay's. There remain two other striking differences: the particular management of peat and turf, necessitated by St Kilda's remoteness, is worthy of more study, while the large-scale harvesting of seabirds on St Kilda clearly marks it out as unique. We have seen that it may have been the 'industrial' scale of fowling, a unique element of the economy, that led to St Kilda's survival during the mid-19th-century clearances on Harris, which so decimated other communities. It is ironic then that St Kilda has come to be seen as both unique and emblematic, while the story is more subtle and more nuanced, and more rewarding for that.

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NOTES

1 A map showing the Outer Hebrides, St Kilda and Pabbay is available by searching the Canmore website for 1492819. A series of other maps of St Kilda can be found by searching for 'St Kilda map'.
2 Mary Harman visited Pabbay in 1976 and deposited a collection of images with RCAHMS (see HES, National Record of the Historic Environment, catalogue no. 551 356/3).

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