

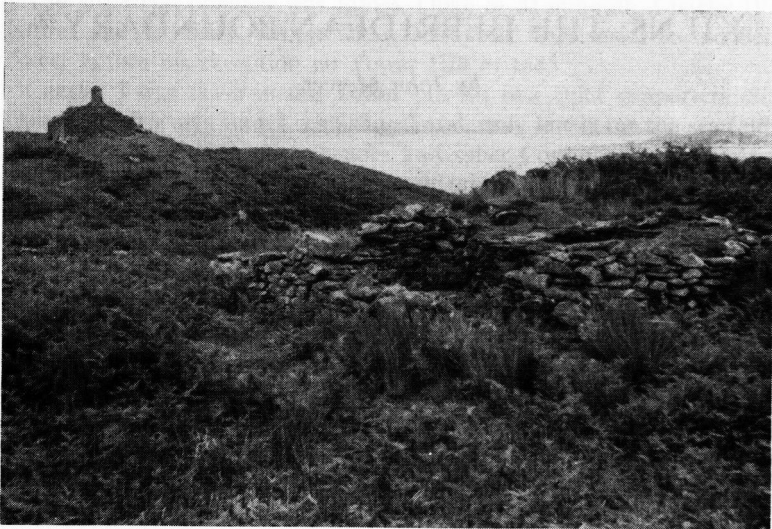
ROOMED AND ROOMLESS GRAIN-DRYING KILNS: THE HEBRIDEAN BOUNDARY ?

by *John Mercer*

AS part of a general study¹ the writer has recently visited most of the Southern Hebrides. This paper² covers two known and six new kilns—three of which have now been excavated, records a very fine rotary quern stone found during the work, and also enlarges on Scott's mention³ of the southern limit of the "roomed" kiln.

The latitude of Scarba, where no kilns were found,⁴ may well be a typological dividing line. In the islands immediately to the north there are three roomed kilns. The example on Eilean an Naoimh, most westerly of the Garvellachs and known for its ecclesiastical remains, was illustrated by Macculloch⁵ and is redrawn here on Plate D(2); the writer has not examined it. Walling *a* was presumably higher than bowl-rim *b*, as in the Lunga example, and the bowl's base was not planned.

Kiln No. 2 (NM 672122) on Plate D(2) is on Garbh Eileach, the largest Garvellach. This island was regularly inhabited until 1871-81 and from it the whole group was farmed. The existence of the kiln was mentioned by Bryce⁶ and it was excavated by the writer in 1972. The kiln, standing on a knoll (Plate A(1)) some 100 yards south-west of the third of the island's houses to become ruined—one remains habitable, has several features not evident from the plan. The kiln-bowl itself, 5 feet deep, was built upon a large slab of blue-grey slate (Plate A(2) after clearing), the slab's limits, in fact, being somewhere under the circular walling. The oblique curved flue had completely collapsed except for the foot or two as it left the kiln's interior. Excavation revealed that the flue too had been floored with slabs, which when found were lying as steps downwards towards the centre of the kiln. The outer limit of the flue could not be clearly defined. Upon the two untouched steps seen on Plate A(3) there was a layer of charcoal and fire-reddened shattered stones: clearly the fire had been made here and, correspondingly, no charcoal was found in the bowl itself. The collapse of the flue had brought down much of the room-face of the kiln-wall itself. Plate A(3) shows the partial reconstruction of the flue roof and, obscuring the innermost replaced slab,

Plate A (1 and 2): Garbh Eileach Kiln

(1) Looking east towards the house ruin and the Black Isles. The reconstructed part of the bowl can be seen.



(2) The bowl, with flue exit. Note the slab base, 2 feet in diameter. The topmost central stones have been replaced.

Plate A (3 and 4): Garbh Eileach Kiln



(3) From the N.E. entrance, after reconstruction of the outer side of the bowl arc and the outer end of the flue. The stepped flue base is as excavated.



(4) From the S.E., showing the rounded east corner and the niche in the N.W. wall. The reconstructed part of the bowl can be seen.

the rebuilt arc of the wall. This arc can be seen to have given way to the slumped and overgrown original walling. The two entrances to the room just appear on Plate A(3). An unexplained narrow niche, at least 2ft. 6ins. high originally, is visible on Plate A(4), in the square-cornered end wall: Scott mentions a small recess in a Lewis roomed kiln. The rounded nearer corners can also be seen on Plate A(4), that to the south-west collapsing. The north-east side wall (Plate A(1)) of the room still stands to a height of 6ft. The structure's entrances were roughly blocked up when found, probably to form a later improvised pen.

Kiln No. 3 (NM 710096) on Plate D(2), apparently unrecorded, lies on Fiola Meadhonach, one of the five northern segments of Lunga, all cut off at high tide from the island's main land-mass. Lunga was farmed throughout the last century; and the 1841 census exceptionally recorded three residents on unidentified "Fiola Fiulta". The only obvious settlement on the northern segments is in fact on Fiola Meadhonach, immediately south-east of the kiln. This latter (Plate B(1)) stands on a slope under an overhanging scarp, and the kiln-bowl itself was presumably placed centrally in the structure to avoid bedrock at the rounded end. The bowl (Plate B(2)), 4ft. deep, was found on excavation to have been built on a slate slab, like the Garbh Eileach example. The flue ran into the centre of the very narrow adjacent room, as did that in the Eileach an Naoimh example, and, also like the latter, had no slab-made extension. However, digging did reveal that a triangular vent had been left through the outer wall opposite the flue. The room's west wall still stands 6ft. high.

The rooms forming part of each of the three kilns are all very small. Scott has described Faroes kilns where the rooms, much larger though also with two opposed entrances, were used for threshing. The rooms of the kilns under discussion must have had another purpose, perhaps for stores when the fires were not alight. In both cases the two entrances may have been part of the draught-regulating mechanism. The extent and nature of the roofing, where it existed, is not clear.

South of Scarba's parallel were found "roomless" kilns, simply a bowl in the shape of a truncated cone, with a flue. Examples include one at Uragaid in North Colonsay under a cliff at Port an Tighe Mhòir (NR 392984), and four in North-east Jura. Two of the latter are at Lussagiven (NR 634868), one just north-west of the road, below the bluff, and the other (NR 636866) immediately north of the settlement's

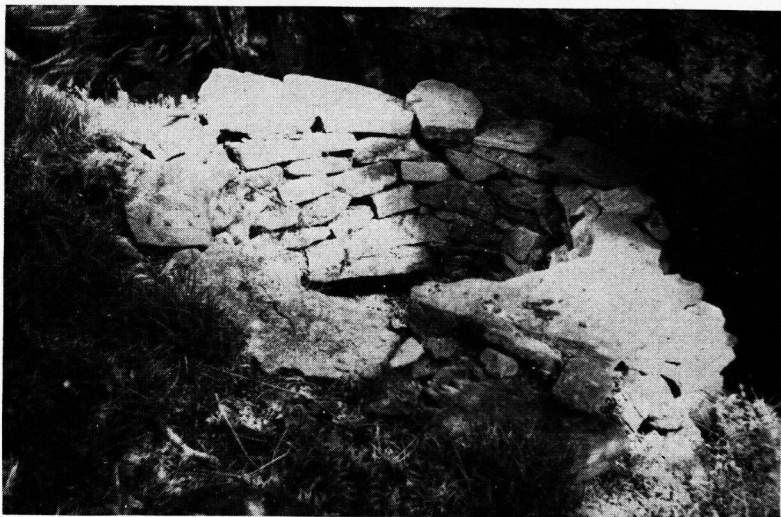
Plate B Lunga Kiln



(1) From the south, with one of the Black Isles beyond: taken immediately after excavation.



(2) From the top of the scarp. The slate slab is visible in the base. A trench in the room's soil build-up links the flue end to the wall vent.

Plate C North Jura Kiln

(1) From above, showing the flue exit. The quern lay on the rim-slab in the right foreground.



(2) From outside, showing the flue end.

Plate C (3)



(3) The upper stone of the rotary quern, 19ins. across.

south-west house. A third (NR 681935) lies 100 yards north-west of the century-old ruins of Carn village, on the south-east margin of the more-recent birch plantation.

The fourth kiln (Plates C(1) and C(2), and No. 4 on D(2)) lies one mile north-east of Ardlussa in North Jura in a natural wood, and is hidden under an extensive overhang very close to the shore opposite Eilean Buidhe Mòr. This kiln is most easily reached by boat. The kiln's bowl is 4ft. deep, and the steeply-sloping outer wall is shown on the plan. Upon excavation, the upper stone (Plate C(3)) of a rotary quern was found on the rim of the bowl. The quern stone is 19ins. across and of a schistose rock. The relief carving, suggesting the three-armed Irish St. Bridget's cross, must nevertheless take its basic form from the three driving holes, normal for querns in this region. A similar quern stone, illustrated in the late nineteenth-century *Catalogue of the National Museum of Antiquities, Edinburgh*, could not be found at the museum. The present quern has been passed to the landowner, Mrs. A. R. Nelson, of Ardlussa.

Plate D (1) The Grain-drying Kilns: location map

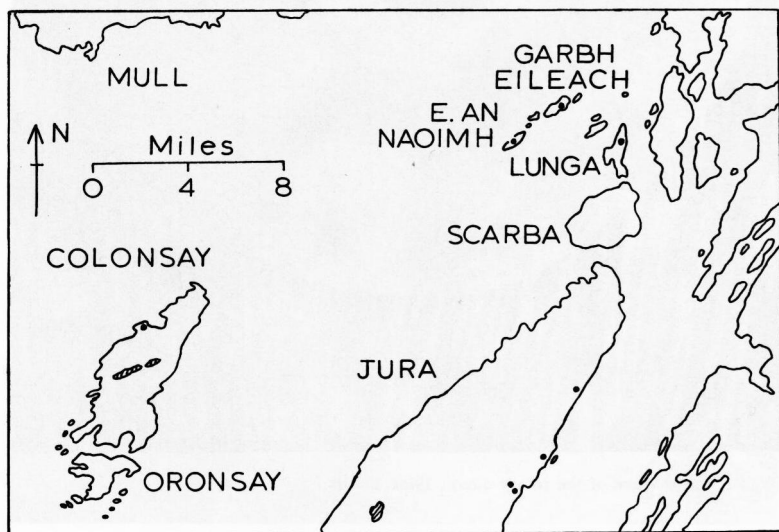
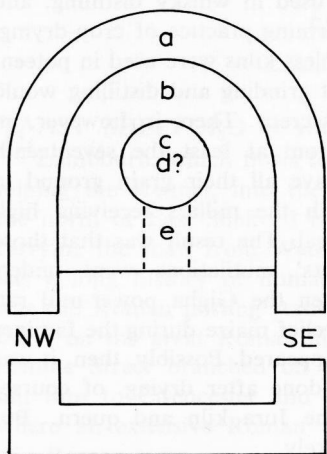
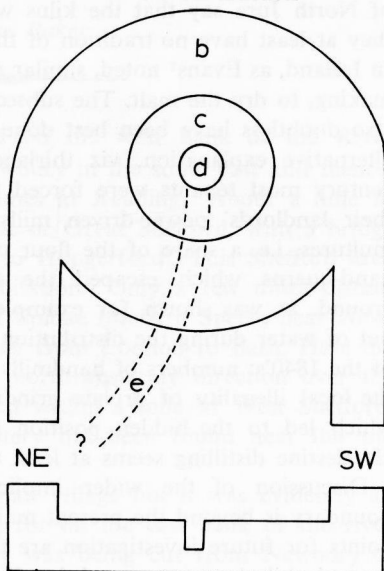


Plate D (2) The Grain-drying Kilns: plans

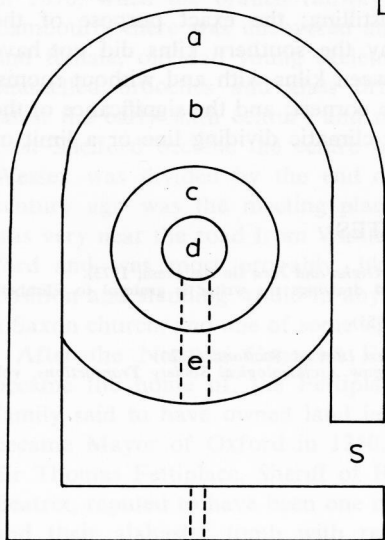
1 Eilean An Naoimh



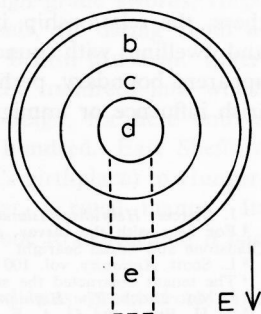
2 Garbh Eileach



3 Fiola Meadhonach



4 North Jura



- a raised walling
- b bowl rim
- c bowl wall
- d bowl base
- e flue



Clandestine operations are suggested by the hiding of this kiln in a place remote from habitation and croplands. Some present inhabitants of North Jura say that the kilns were used in whisky distilling, and they at least have no tradition of the farming practice of crop-drying. In Ireland, as Evans⁷ noted, similar roomless kilns were used in poteen-making, to dry the malt. The subsequent grinding and distilling would also doubtless have been best done in secrecy. There is, however, an alternative explanation, viz thirlage. From at least the seventeenth century most tenants were forced to have all their grain ground in their landlords' power-driven mills, with the millers receiving high multures, i.e. a share of the flour or meal. The result was that those hand-querens which escaped the factors' mutilations went underground, as was shown for example when the Gigha power-mill ran out of water during the distribution of relief maize during the famines of the 1840's: numbers of handmills re-appeared. Possibly, then, it was the local illegality of private grinding (done after drying, of course) which led to the hidden position of the Jura kiln and quern. But clandestine distilling seems at least as likely.

Discussion of the wider implications of the possible kiln-type boundary is beyond the present mainly circumstantial report. Obvious points for future investigation are the extent to which the grain dried in each kiln-type was used in distilling; the exact purpose of the minute rooms and the reason why the southern kilns did not have these; the relationship, if any, between kilns with and without rooms, and dwellings with round or square corners; and the significance of the apparent boundary, perhaps a past climatic dividing line or a limit of Irish influence or immigration.

NOTES

¹ J. Mercer, *Hebridean Islands: Colonsay, Gigha and Jura* (in the press, 1973).

² For help with the survey, excavation and drawings the writer is grateful to Elisabeth Gladstone and Susan Searight.

³ L. Scott, *Antiquity*, vol. 100 (December, 1951).

⁴ The tenant obstructed the survey.

⁵ J. Macculloch, *The Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland* (1824).

⁶ T. H. Bryce and G. A. F. Knight, *Glasgow Archaeological Society Transactions*, vol. 8 (1933).

⁷ E. E. Evans, *Irish Heritage* (1942).