

# The Prediction of a Shieling Site on South Uist

A journey of discovery on the southern flanks of Beinn Mhòr by Simon M Davies



*Beinn Mhòr and its foothills dominate the northern horizon of the Loch Aineort hinterland (© SMD)*

|               |   |                        |
|---------------|---|------------------------|
| First Witch:  | When shall we three meet again?<br>In thunder, lightning, or in rain? |                        |
| Second Witch: | When the hurly-burly's done,<br>When the battle's lost and won.       |                        |
| Third Witch:  | That will be ere the set of sun.                                      |                        |
| First Witch:  | Where the place?  |                        |
| Second Witch: | Upon the heath. . .   | Macbeth. Act 1 Scene 1 |

## Introduction

The desire to forecast or predict is an inherent characteristic of the human condition and has been part of our make-up for as long as records exist. Men and women throughout the ages have made their careers claiming such talents and have been both revered and reviled for their troubles. Today, it is not considered politically correct to practice some of the techniques employed by Shakespeare's infamous trio, although cauldrons are easier to obtain now, since Harry Potter's arrival in 1999. Other, more logical predictions may be elicited across a variety of subjects if the correct data are interrogated.

Shieling sites and their associated *bothain àirighe*<sup>1</sup> are not unusual on South Uist – indeed they are frequent upland features encountered both here and across much of rural Scotland. They were an important component of early and mediaeval agropastoral farming practices and were part of the seasonal cyclical choreography of crofting for many centuries. Toolis showed that Scottish evidence for these practices goes back to the Bronze Age, and many shieling-associated practices and rituals can be directly traced back to Paganism. For centuries sheilings played an important role both practically and culturally in the lives of generations of this Hebridean community. This report documents a novel method of discovering unrecorded archaeology by drawing together seemingly random pieces of data and making a logical assumption which, on direct interrogation, proves the original hypothesis. It underlines the importance of understanding relevant local customs and cultures.

Western Isles' shieling usage ceased in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century but is deeply woven into the traditions of local families and the communal memory of this Gaelic society. Historically, some Western Isles individuals were reputed to have 'second sight'. In this report I can confirm that no crystal balls, goat's entrails or other animal body parts were used in the academic detection of this exceptional South Uist group of *bothain àirighe*, but proves the value of drawing together data from a wide range of sources.

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<sup>1</sup> Dwelly tells us that *bothain àirighe* is the correct Gaelic term for 'shieling huts' or bothies. the singular term is *bothan*. The *àirigh* originally referred to the upland area of common grazing used for summer pasture, not the huts themselves.

## The choreography of crofting

Here, for convenience, crofting (with a small 'c') is being used as a generic description of a mixed farming practice where a large number of tenanting farmers each work a small part of land at a subsistence level, also working for a laird or estate as labour in lieu of rental. This is similar to Crofting (with a capital 'C'), a legal status of Crofters today, as defined in various pieces of legislation following the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Napier Commission, but by using crofting for discussion, a wider tranche of history may be considered.

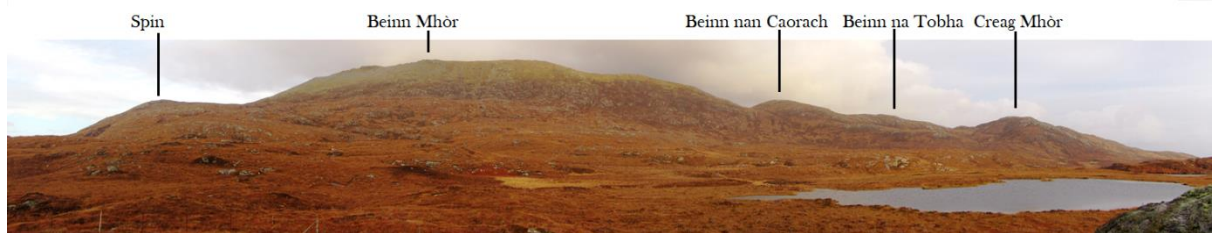
As soon as mixed farming starts, it is apparent that having grazing animals sharing fields where one is trying to grow grain crops for both family food and animals' winter fodder, is not easily achieved without constant vigilance to separate the animals from the growing crops. One of the mechanisms for overcoming this was the pragmatic evolution of transhumance. Grazing animals could be taken away from the home farmstead to graze areas of pasture not available during the winter season, either due to waterlogging or snow cover. These areas were usually upland grasslands and sometimes, particularly in parts of Europe, might be more than a hundred kilometres from the home farm (Berman, p. 105). It is likely that some of these upland pasture links were established in pre-history by early tribes from their days of nomadic animal husbandry, prior to the introduction of field crops which necessitated strategic adoption of transhumance separation. Indeed, tribes might have had a sense of ownership of places they regularly visited on their nomadic cycle. From an economic viewpoint, it makes sense to utilise seasonal resources, enabling more of the home farm to be safely cultivated in the absence of animals, which had spent the winter improving those same fields with their manuring.

Carmichael describes how, on Uist, at Beltane (May 1<sup>st</sup> of the Julian calendar) the townships emptied, with animals and families all heading for the upland shielings for the summer. The shielings are NOT a hut in the hills but, just as a croft is a farm, not a house, the shieling is the common-grazing of upland pasture which usually had settlement in the form of *bothain àirighe* or shieling huts. Each township would have its own designated shieling(s) and each family would be allocated a particular *bothan* and a quota of grazing animals which he might take into the hills, although these quotas may be pragmatically negotiated between neighbours. Fraser tells us about Beltane (from *Bal Teine* = Baal's Fire) first night's celebration at the shielings, when a new fire might be ritually raised for the township. Following this, the men would return to the main farm, taking a new ember for the home fire and could tend the crops as required, carry out any general maintenance to the house and croft (walls fences etc.) The women and children would remain at the shieling making dairy products for over-winter supplies during the summer, returning at *Lughnasadh* (August 1<sup>st</sup> of the Julian calendar) to the home farm to help with the harvest, moving the animals first to the fallow 'watches' and then to the stubble fields once harvested. Since the adoption of the Gregorian calendar, nominally in 1752, the dates of Beltane and Lughnasadh on the 1<sup>st</sup> of the month have become the 12<sup>th</sup> of their respective months, which probably accounts for the legal shooting of game-birds on the hills starting on this date, once the herds and families had left the shielings. Many of the Hebridean islands retained the Julian calendar for centuries, New Year was still celebrated on the 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> January on North Uist in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and hay fields are still cut and stacked before 12<sup>th</sup> August before allowing animals to graze them.

Goodrich-Freer gives details that "shealing" time was not only for production of dairy products for winter food stocks, but time would also be given over to spinning of woollen or linen yarn for later weaving at the main farmstead. The season in the shielings was a time of joy, away from the strictures of the township, it was probably the main place where friendships and relationships were forged and strengthened. Many folk stories were spawned by shieling activities and events, often incorporating allegorical themes designed to maintain the society's status quo or boost local pride or ambition.

Further complexity was added to this choreography of seasonal transhumance during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century with the adoption of kelping, the processing, by controlled burning, of various species of seaweed into a raw concentrate of soda ash, potash and iodine compounds. This material, after further processing, was an essential resource for the glass, cosmetics and chemical industries and became an important economic contributor to Highland and Island estates, and nationally prompted the data collection of Scotland's First Statistical Accounts, then the U.K.'s largest data exercise since the Domesday Book in England under the Normans. The kelp working season was, by a fortunate coincidence, similar to that of the shieling migration, and the men, often with senior male children, would go to the kelp as the women and younger children were at the shieling. The kelping settlements were usually bothies similar to those at the shielings and, as they too were township-specific, would be relatively near the *bothain àirighe*, allowing for a few stolen nights of passion with spouses or girlfriends (or both?)

## The shielings of Southwest Beinn Mhòr



*Identifying Beinn Mhòr and its undulating ridge of foothills (© SMD)*

At 620 metres (2,034 ft), Beinn Mhòr is South Uist's highest hill. Its foothills run from the Minch at Creag Mhòr and Beinn na Tobha, in a north-westerly direction ending in the northern buttress of Meala Breac just south of the Abhuinn Roag, almost bisecting the pasture areas of Uist. The south-western face of Beinn Mhòr and its subsidiary hills are used as shieling lands for several townships along its long length and there is a fairly regular distribution of small groups of *bothain àirighe* at Àirigh an Lagain, Beinn nan Caorach/Allt Altissary (DES 2018, South Spin (DES 2017), Abhuinn Gheatraidh and Gleann Dorchaidh. All these are fairly evenly spaced at a little over a mile apart, except for between Allt Altissary and South Spin where the gap is more than double other intervals, particularly perplexing as vegetation conditions all along that contour 'route' were so similar to nearby shielings.

## Kelping on the northern shores of Loch Aineort

Kelping revenues were the single largest economic contributor to the Clanranald estates in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. The estate consisted chiefly of Benbecula and South Uist and most townships had kelp quotas to fulfil as part of their rent agreement. Consequently, the coastlines were punctuated with small seasonal kelping communities, resembling seaside shieling hut settlements. Along the northern shores of Loch Aineort there were many such kelping settlements. There were three such groups along the diminutive Sloc Dubh (a small lagoon-loch about 1.5 km long, at the eastern extremity of Loch Aineort), at Hafn (south), Altissary (midway) and Allt Bholagair (north) (DES 2018).

Each individual township was a self-contained economic unit, rented and managed by a tacksman and assisted by a local grazing officer and other local officials with, later, often a kelp supervisor. Townships would have individual targets for labour, produce and kelp to be submitted annually in lieu of monetary rent. The estate would set both the targets and the territory over which the townships ranged, ensuring each would have their individual allotted agriculture, grazing, shieling and kelping areas commensurate with their expected returns. These centralised political controls proved essential for the search for the 'missing' Allt Bholagair shieling area and its *bothain àirighe* settlement.

## Allt Bholagair – ‘something special’

To the naturalist Allt Bholagair is something extremely special, as it has a remarkable quantity and diversity of trees, for Uist, along its lower reaches. It is considered important enough to be given maximum protection as a SSSI for botanical diversity and has been further protected with a perimeter of 2 metre deer fencing. South Uist has relatively few large trees, although the earliest account of the island by Donald Munro described “... the grate ile of Ywst, 34 myles lange from southwest to the northeist, sex myle braid, ane fertile countrey and maine laiche land, full of heigh hills and forests on the eist cost, ore southeist” (the underscoring is mine). This is unlikely to mean wall to wall trees blotting out the sky, but certainly scrubland with many trees and coppices for cover, yet open enough for hunting in. The tree species, predominantly hardwoods such as beech, birch, oak with some hazel, ash rowan and juniper, found at Allt Bholagair represent some of the last vestiges of this former ‘Celtic forest’ environment (Atlantic Woodland Alliance). Seeds taken from many of these original specimens are now being propagated for re-introduction to Uist, such as at the southern end of Sloc Dubh itself.

## In search of the ‘lost shieling’

It was quite reasonable to attribute the Allt Altissary and Beinn nan Caorach (from which the Allt springs) *bothain àirighe* to the Altissary township and kelping settlement, and Hafn would have had access to Àirigh an Lagain, high on Creag Mhòr; but there was no obvious *bothain àirighe* that might be attributed to Allt Bholagair kelping settlement, which seems to have been associated with the Rubha Bhualte crofting settlement whose rig and furrow fields surrounded the kelping site. The shielings at South Spin were too distant and closer to other townships. This coupled with the surprising ‘void’ in the regularity of the shieling sequence, in spite of good available grazing, indicated there should be another group of *bothain àirighe* present in an area in which none were recorded.



Map indicates the distribution of *bothain àirighe* groups on the southern aspect of Beinn Mhòr and the kelping settlements of Sloc Dubh (Bartholomew historical map reproduced courtesy of National Library of Scotland)

Given the frequency and volume of visitors to the Allt Bholagair area, it seemed extremely unlikely that there might be unrecorded *bothain* near to the stream or its immediate environs. However, there seemed few other suitable places to search. Other suitable nearby areas were either allotted to other townships, or were being exploited for rig and furrow agriculture, precluding grazing access during the summer growing season – the very reason for transhumance systems.

Surprisingly, examination of satellite imagery did reveal a potential candidate group of 2-5 possible *bothain* close to the stream itself in what seemed to be a bracken field, a little further north than the SSSI fencing. Ever cautious of satellite ‘ghosts’ and quirks, the only way to be sure what might be there would involve shoe leather (or wellie rubber) and eyes. Knowing the area was well traversed by people; and that the Ordnance Survey had strict criteria for recording walls of knee height or more, it seemed most likely that any discoveries might be ethereal ground-marks or vestigial stone settings at best.



## A field visit to Allt Bholagair

The most direct route to the area is via the footpaths through *Arinaban* Woodland, North Loch Aineort, crossing the deer fence at the north-eastern stile and heading cross country in a roughly north-east route towards the summit of Beinn Mhòr. The site is adjacent to the Allt Bholagair. My first view of the site, from about 120 metres, was of a few white stones amid a russet sea of dead autumnal bracken.

This was certainly a surprise; I had not expected to see any masonry until standing at the site. When I did get to the site, it was immediately apparent that this was in fact something special. There were two main *bothain*, large by Uist standards (3-4 metres internally), sub-circular, with east-facing main doorways. Their walls were still standing to almost a metre generally and 1.6 metres at the highest point. Both main *bothain* had associated, slightly smaller secondary chambers, positioned to the southwest of their main *bothan*, each with their own access door in their northern wall. The southern secondary chamber was only a stone setting where the turf walls had eroded away over the decades, but the northern secondary chamber was entirely stone construction. The site was entirely covered by dead bracken litter, restricting both visibility of and meaningful recording the features. It is likely the bracken in high summer would have been between waist and chest height, thus obscuring the site completely.



First view of the Allt Bholagair bothan àirighe site (© SMD)



Generated with [Agisoft Metashape](#)

Overhead composite view of the bothain àirighe site at Allt Bholagair, as found. The entire site is heavily overgrown by dead bracken litter, obscuring many structural details but three subcircular chambers are partly visible and the southern stone setting and the encircling perimeter wall line can both just be traced. (Screen capture from the author's 3D photogrammetry)

Looking beyond the group of *bothain*, the shieling stretches up the glen in a north-westerly direction rising up to the pass at Loch na Làire and Bealach Tigh Iarass between Spin and Beinn Beag Tuath, beyond which lies Loch Iarass and the South Spin *bothain àirighe* settlement.



The southern *bothain* group is sited on a low mound, barely above the surrounding ground level, about three metres within a notable group of large boulders. These might represent the position of a boulder-and-turf produce clamp. The mass of stone coupled with the latent heat of evaporation from



*High oblique view of the southern structures as found. Only a single boulder of the 'clamp' group visible. The One-metre red-white ranging pole (right of centre) is aligned north (red) - south in this and future photos (© SMD)*

the turf (if wetted daily) would serve to lower the interior temperature of the clamp by 2-5 degrees compared with the outside ambient conditions. The main chamber of the southern group is sub-circular, 3-4 metres in diameter with a single doorway in the eastern wall.

Attached to this, at the south-western section of the wall, is a smaller subcircular stone setting, around 2 metres diameter, representing the foundations of a turf walled chamber probably for dairying activities. Again, the cooling properties of the turf walls would be an asset for these activities.

Behind this group in the photo, a single massive white boulder of the storage clamp can be clearly seen.

The northern main *bothan* was atop (and partly excavated into) a large mound around 1.2 metres above the 'normal' ground level. This is a common feature in Uist shielings, thought to help stabilise the footings and offer increased protection from the weather. In several places there were pieces of roughly dressed stone protruding from this foundation mound, possibly suggestive of a concealed earlier structure. Such mound structures were commonly occupied by *bothain àirighe* as they would be a very convenient stone quarry to donate recycled material for building the structures now visible on the surface. The Lewisian gneiss of Uist is not an easy building material. Most does not split of shape readily, so the reuse of material is common. As building methods using this rock are so limited, it can be difficult to attribute age to particular building styles.



*The northern group, the main bothan atop its mound. The secondary cell, larger than that of the southern group, is on a lower foundation level, partly cutting into the main mound (© SMD)*

It was a pleasant surprise how many original features were still extant. This is certainly one the most complete self-contained group of Uist *bothain àirighe* I have encountered. Yes, they are ruins, but many of their walls are still near original height. The northern main chamber, since clearing bracken litter, is revealed to be rectangular and has a considerable quantity of fallen flattish masonry across the floor suggesting it may have had a partly or fully corbelled stone roof. This fallen masonry may now be preserving original features such as a fireplace or artefacts.



Unusually, the entire site appears surrounded by the remnants of a perimeter enclosure wall in a rough figure of eight, made up of a series of large, irregularly spaced boulders. From the altered vegetation and some residual ridges between the boulders, it seems likely that the wall was 'completed' with turf infill between the stone skeleton, now much degraded and eroded away. This is a feature seldom seen in Uist shieling groups but, if it were a common practice, suggests most would have been entirely turf constructions and no longer discernible. Possibly this site had the advantage of plentiful boulders, maybe from the earlier structure within the mound, to allow the 'luxury' of a more substantial perimeter structure. It is also possible the peripheral structure was for flood defence during times of spate of the Allt Bhologair.

## Looking more closely

After recording the site photographically in its raw state, both with conventional photographs and sequenced high level photos for 3D photogrammetry virtual models, several days were spent clearing the overburden of dead bracken by hand from the site, being careful not to further disturb the masonry and particularly not to disturb any exposed potential floor surfaces to preserve any detail of features which might remain in situ. Over a hundred and fifty sacks of vegetation debris were removed from the site and distributed in the wider surrounding bracken field. No attempt was made to remove



*Overhead view of southern bothan and secondary chamber's stone setting foundations after clearance of bracken litter. (© SMD)*

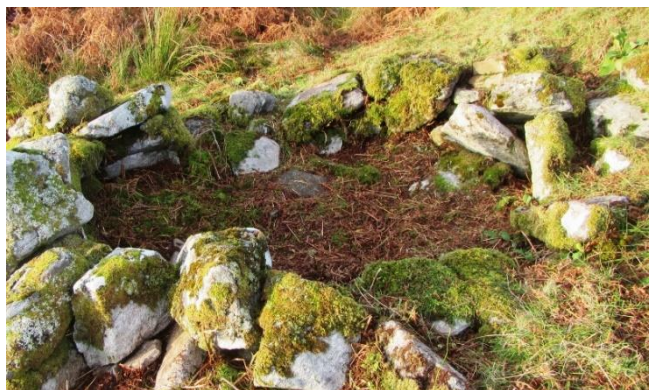
deeper rhizomes nor to treat these chemically, bearing in mind the proximity to the Allt Bhologair stream and the associated SSSI area downstream.

SEARS recommends crushing or cutting of growing bracken at least twice yearly to maintain mechanical control. The removal of bracken litter will have minimal long-term contribution to bracken control, but certainly allows for more detailed site examination. Decisions will need to



*The main chamber of the northern group, many flattish stones litter the floor, possibly collapsed corbelling (© SMD)*

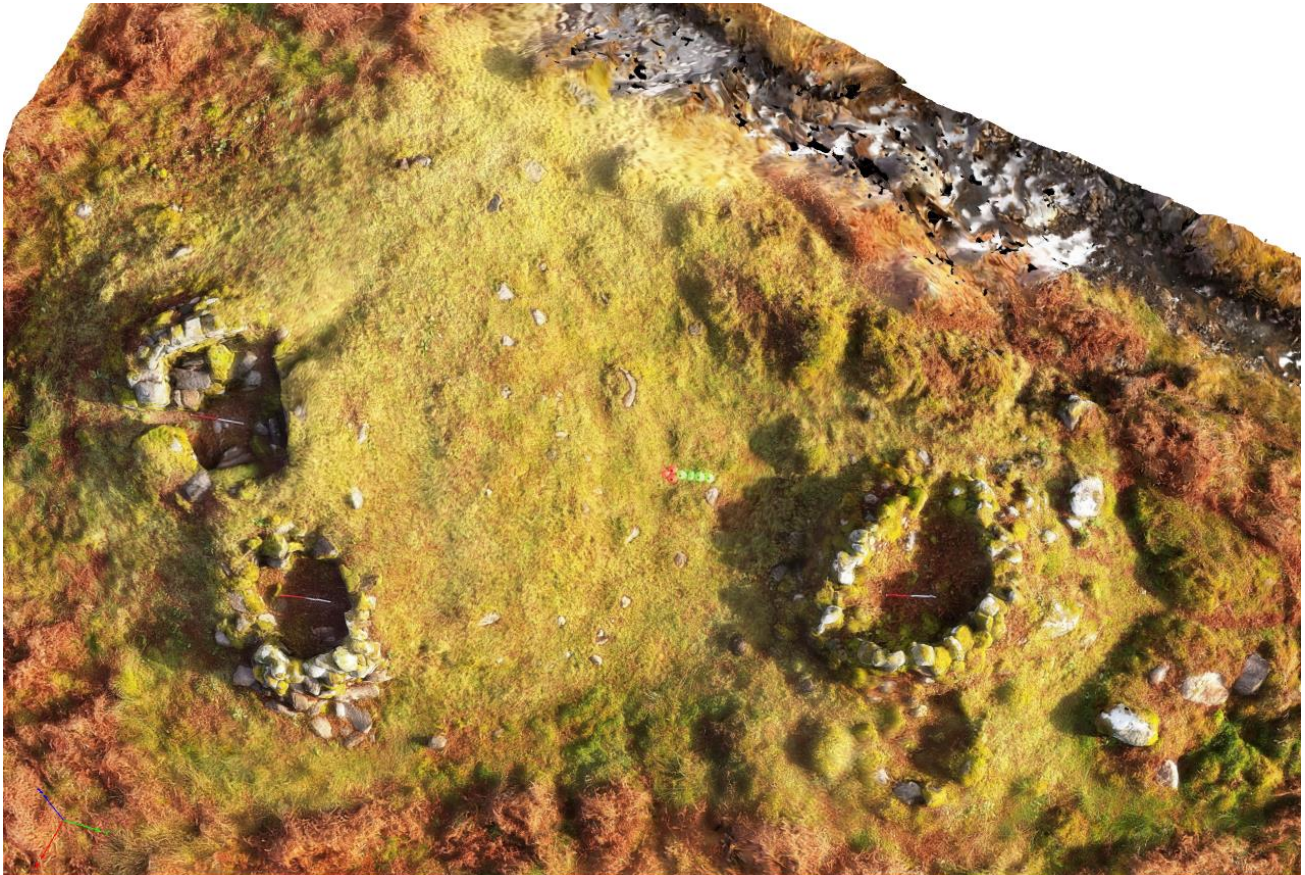
be made later about bracken control. Care must be taken as snipe, ground nesting birds, were observed on several of my visits; their presence will influence timing and methods of treatment to be considered. Chemical controls are discouraged close to water courses and SSSI areas. If control is deemed desirable, other agencies and stakeholders will be consulted when the current Covid restrictions allow such interactions. (many local Uist offices are currently closed)



*The northern group's secondary chamber, probably used for dairy activities (© SMD)*



Following the removal of bracken litter, the site was recorded by conventional photography, overhead photography (using a 7-metre pole and vertically mounted camera) and sequential high-angle photography, used for creation of 3D photogrammetric virtual models of the whole site and the individual groups. The limits of this printed publication require that photographs can only be reproduced at limited resolution. The full resolution photos are available from the author on request. The 3D models are also available as PDF files or online at [www.sketchfab.com/smilemaker/models](http://www.sketchfab.com/smilemaker/models).



*A screen capture of the site after removal of bracken litter from approximately 300 m<sup>2</sup> area of ground. Removal of this overburden reveals the true shape and dimensions of the various chambers. The large mound around an under the northern group can be more easily identified as can many of the large masonry stones eroding from its surface. (from the author's 3D photogrammetry)*

## Conclusions

The main conclusion to be drawn from this was that an understanding of the culture of earlier historic periods can realistically raise expectations of 'missing' archaeological remains. The more collateral evidence that can be assembled, coupled with knowledge of local culture and traditions, the greater the likelihood of successfully finding 'lost' features by what may be termed *academic detection*, even before pursuing other resources. We are fortunate that many new tools are available for desk-based initial research. Perhaps the most important of these novel resources is in the choice of satellite imagery, but one must exercise caution about optimistic conclusions from a collection of pixels which may prove to be an artifact. (Beware of the Google watermark *et alia!*)

At the end of the day, the only way to find, identify and record any archaeology is by fieldwork. There can be no substitute for seeing and touching a site before recording it to the best of one's ability. Again, we have a greater range of recording methods. The improvements in digital photography mean it is easy to get good field records, and check their quality on site, without delays for processing of film. Photogrammetry allows sites to be quickly recorded in 3D for analysis back at a warm base, rather than spending much time on a wind-swept moor or blasted heath! Such virtual models can greatly assist in decisions for subsequent field visits, either formulating an agenda or sometimes dismissing the need for



further surveying. None of what has been said so far should preclude the application of traditional surveying and recording techniques. Often the disciplined process of recording will assist the fullest understanding and interpretation of a site, particularly one which might be complex or multi-period.

Overall, the technique might be condemned as 'just following a hunch', to which I would plead guilty as charged – just as Howard Carter would have done in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. A Uist shieling group might not be the tomb of an almost-forgotten boy-Pharaoh, but the thrill of the chase and ecstasy of success can be just as satisfying when the initial hypothesis is proved to be correct.



*View of the site during the litter clearing, viewed from 'Cnoc na h-Airighean' (see Footnote) (© SMD)*

## Footnote

A local crofter who visited the site has named the hill protecting the shielings with shelter and privacy, 'Cnoc na h-Airighean' (hill of the shielings) permanently memorialising the site, its place in the landscape and his personal evaluation of its importance. *Tapadh leat, Eairdsidh.*



*'Cnoc na h-Airighean' is the low hill in the left foreground. The site is visible as a small green mound, centre right. (© SMD)*

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## Toponymy and Glossary of some Gaelic terms used in the text

Gaelic place names can be very revealing regarding descriptions or earlier usage of landscape features and can give a greater understanding of both the land and culture. However, the divination of place names can be challenging as spellings become corrupted over time and not always helped with some of the early attempts to ‘anglicise’ the names phonetically. In the Western Isles the influence of Old Norse adds a further level of complexity contributing to around 30% of Western Isles’ place names, often with altered spelling to ‘fit’ Gaelic pronunciation conventions. The integration of Norse and Gaelic language elements and the contemporaneous settlements with cultural integration of Norse and Celts at the end of the Iron Age suggests a less confrontational coexistence than sometimes assumed.

With regard to *Allt Bholagair* itself, the name is a composite of Gaelic and phonetically Gaelicised Old Norse (O.N.). The *Allt* component is Gaelic, although originally sourced from Pictish, meaning a fast-flowing stream or burn. The exact derivation of the *Bholagair* component is a little challenging. O.S. Name Books give several options for the name, *Allt Volagir*, *Allt Mholagir* or *Allt Bholagarry*. William Bald’s ‘*Plan*’ shows the stream clearly, naming it as *Ault Vorelgar*. The suffix, -garry, -gir or -gar, is a common construct in Uist township names, derived from the O.N., *garð*, meaning a boundary or enclosed area. More difficult is the first component. The Gaelic alphabet has no V, so phonetically the audible ‘v’ is represented by *mh* or *bh*. The O.N. therefore could reference *valla* = ‘of the fields’, *vallar* = ‘of the field’ or perhaps *möli* = ‘pebbles’, lenited in Gaelic to *mholi* reflecting the markedly pebbled beach of the *Sloc Dubh* kelping settlement at the mouth of the *Allt*. Without further evidence or documentation it is impossible to be definitive about the original intention of the name although it is worth noting that both *Vollgarden* and *Vollegarden* can be found in Norway and there are at least fifteen Icelandic (the closest modern language to O.N.) occurrences of *Vallargarður*.

|                   |   |                    |   |
|-------------------|---|--------------------|---|
| <i>abhuinn</i>    | (also <i>abhainn</i> ) a river (c.f. Eng. Avon)                         | <i>dubh</i>        | black   |
| <i>aineort</i>    | (from <i>ainneart</i> ) – force   | <i>Eairsidh</i>    | a name, Archie                                    |
| <i>àirigh</i>     | a shieling, upland grazing area   | <i>gheatraidh</i>  | gatekeeping                                       |
| <i>allt</i>       | a fast stream or burn (from Pictish)                                    | <i>gleann</i>      | a valley or glen                                  |
| <i>Ariniban</i>   | from <i>àirigh na ban</i> the hut of the women (referencing local nuns) | <i>hafn</i>        | from Old Norse ‘ <i>havn</i> ’ a harbour or haven |
| <i>beag/bheag</i> | small (m and f forms)   | <i>làir(e)</i>     | a mare (of a mare) (pl. <i>làrach</i> )           |
| <i>beinn</i>      | a mountain or peaked hill   | <i>loch</i>        | a lake or enclosed fjord-like inlet               |
| <i>bothan</i>     | a hut or bothy. Also, <i>bothain</i> (plural)                           | <i>meall</i>       | a rounded ‘lumpy’ hill                            |
| <i>breac</i>      | spotted   | <i>mòr/mhòr</i>    | large (m and f forms)                             |
| <i>buailte</i>    | a bull’s enclosure  | <i>rubha</i>       | a promontory or headland                          |
| <i>caorach</i>    | sheep   | <i>sloc</i>        | a pit, hollow, lagoon or pool                     |
| <i>cnoc</i>       | a hill  | <i>tapadh leat</i> | thank-you   |
| <i>creag</i>      | a crag  | <i>na tobha</i>    | a hoe, Gaelicised from O.N.                       |
| <i>deas</i>       | south   |                    | <i>haugr</i> = mound                              |
| <i>dorchaidh</i>  | darkening   | <i>tuath</i>       | north   |

**Special thanks** to Dr. Jake King of the Ainm-Àite project and Mr. Roger Auger of Griomasaigh for their discussions and contributions to the toponymy information; and to Dr. Michael Given, Senior Lecturer (Archaeology), University of Glasgow for his encouragement, suggestions and proof reading.

The site may be found at NF 79918 29736 (Central datum post), an easy, if wet underfoot, 2km walk north-east through Arinaban woodlands at North Loch Aineort, crossing the deer fence at the NE stile.