A Benbecula Crannog

The crannog as seen from the low plateau to the north of the site, showing the extensive shrubs on the surface and periphery © SMD

Introduction

During the recent search for potential crannog structures, many possible sites were identified using map and satellite imagery. Most of these, when examined in the field were less convincing as to their authenticity as true crannogs – many were primarily bedrock or discounted on grounds of size and/or shape. However, a few did apparently fulfil the selection criteria in spite of having no known provenance as to their origins. This site is one such unrecognised crannog on Benbecula.

Location and general description

The site is on Loch na Chraoibh Mòire, to the north of the B891 road between Creagorry and Port Pheadar. It lies just to the north of the site of a 'Cairn', shown on Wm Bald's 'Plan of Benbecula', surveyed 1805 and reported by Ian Crawford (DES 1966) (Canmore site #84375).

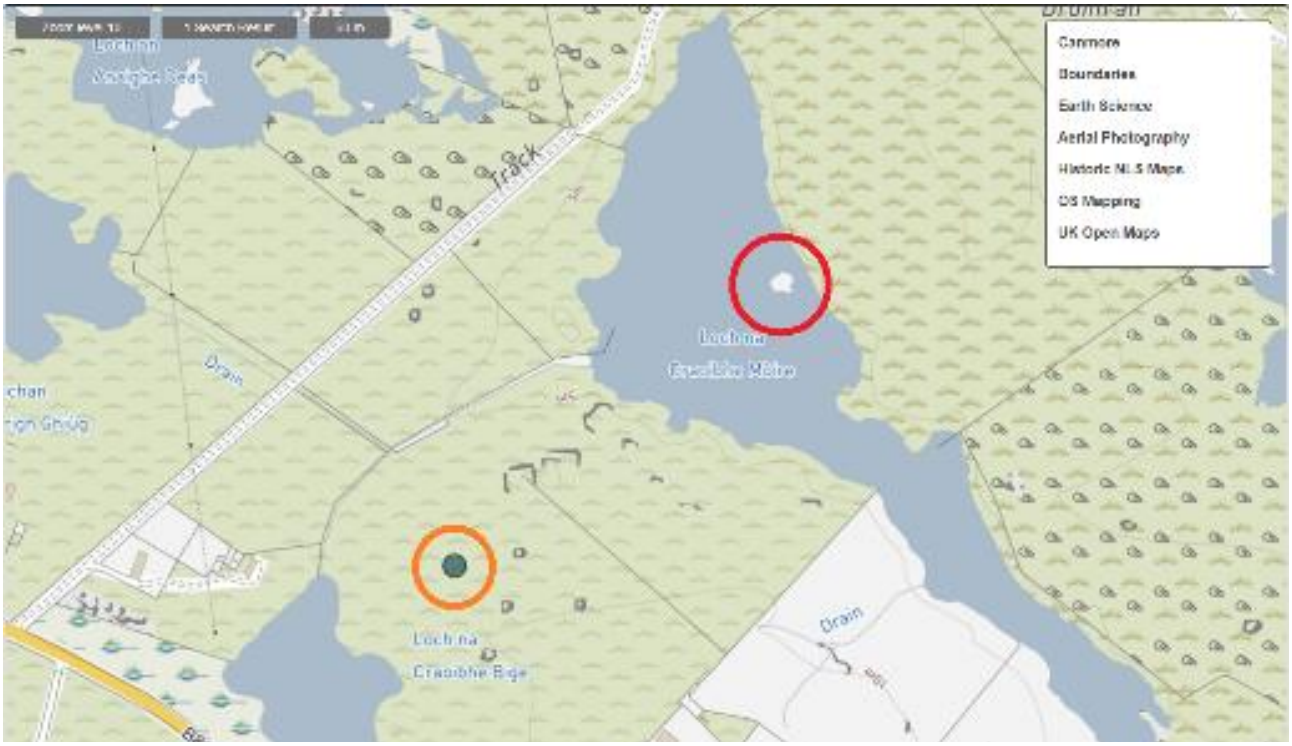
General location of the site on OS road map and Explorer series maps, taken from Canmore mapping

The crannog is at NF 80603 49375 and has a subsurface boulder causeway directly from the nearest shoreline. The islet measures some 12 x 11 metres (N-S, W-E) and is some 10 metres from the northern shore of the loch, which rises along that section to a low heather-clad plateau, some 4-6 metres above the loch's water level.

The islet is covered with vegetation although some exposed stonework can be seen on parts of the surface. The apparent diffuse nature of the outline on satellite imagery seems to be a function of the overhanging bushes, probably *Salix species* and *Myrica gale* growing around the periphery reaching out a metre or more along parts of the circumference. The true outline appears to be sub-circular slightly domed, rising to little more than about a metre above the loch's surface.

Accessing the site

The crannog is easily reached on foot. There is a farm track leading northeast from the B891 to the northern extremity of the loch, from where it is a short walk along the shoreline to the closest point to the crannog, where the sub-surface causeway is clearly visible. If attempting to cross to the islet,



High resolution plan of the site and locality, Crannog is circled in Red, the reported cairn site in Orange, from Canmore mapping.

extreme caution should be exercised as the stone surfaces are slippery and the loch deepens quickly beyond the causeway edges. As the loch's surface is seldom entirely calm, walking poles or wading staffs should be used to ensure personal safety when crossing.

The section of the farm track closest to the main road also serves as an access road to a private dwelling, so if parking a vehicle, this should be done on the side of the greenway track, taking care not to block access by farm vehicles. As ever, gates should be left closed or open, as found.

Discussion

The site has only been visually inspected, not archaeologically interrogated, so it is not possible to be certain of the provenance of the site. The proximity of other prehistoric sites and features in the area show that the area had a degree of importance in prehistoric times, strongly supporting the claim that this is a site of a prehistoric crannog site. It is hoped that further visual inspection of both the islet and the loch bottom might give further evidence for the claim and might warrant further archaeological investigation at some time in the future.

Evidence from similar sites in the Western Isles have started to give us some insight into both the building methods employed in prehistoric crannog creation and prompted much speculation as to their importance and function for those early settlers. Their 'normal' size suggests they were too small to represent lake dwellings but may have been sites used for ritual deposition of artefacts, as large quantities of prehistoric ceramic sherds have been found in the waters surrounding some crannogs. No doubt, as further sites are investigated, a clearer picture might emerge as to the importance of these sites to their creators.

ESRI Satellite Imagery of the crannog - the apparent irregularity of the outline an artefact from the overhanging shrubs reproduced with permission of the National Library of Scotland

The realisation that satellite imagery can be misleading, due to overhanging vegetation is likely to be important, perhaps encouraging more field visits to sites previously dismissed due to irregularities of outlines on the (relatively) low resolution imagery freely available on common internet channels. The higher resolution satellite images which can be commercially available are unlikely to fully resolve these issues and are likely to be price-prohibitive to the amateur archaeologist or community group, but can easily be resolved by field visits, possibly in conjunction with drone photography which can give high quality images at a more affordable price and can be combined with photogrammetry to allow virtual site archives to be created and examined.

Conclusions

Apart from the very obvious result, i.e., the identification of another Western Isles crannog, this field exercise has shown both the value and limitations of desk-based investigations with regard to data observed on both maps and satellite imagery. By implication, it also raises questions as to the accuracy of national Ordnance Survey mapping as the organisation moves away from direct observation by surveyors on the ground to the use of satellite and aerial photography for data collection and map outline definition.

Overhanging vegetation along the margins of watercourses in particular can easily make the placement of accurate border positions almost impossible if relying entirely on birds-eye views of features. On larger features – river courses and loch shorelines, it is reasonable that the margin definition may be accurately extrapolated, but on small features, particularly for small offshore islets, this extrapolation cannot be accurately guessed, and true accuracy might only be achieved by direct field observations. This is unlikely to be resolved due to the large cost implications of such an exercise, particularly for remote sites where access may be unrealistic. It therefore is important to be aware of the accuracy limitations of maps, particularly when considering the detailed morphology of small features.

It is likely that many of these anomalies could be obviated as more use is made of vertical LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) systems for topographic mapping , which can often bypass overhanging vegetation. Similar Bathymetric LiDAR systems also may help to acquire detailed information of subsurface contours of both lochs ands inshore sea-beds.

Taking these aspects into account, it is apparent that field visits and direct personal observation is the best way of ensuring the nature of sites and features. If trying to identify specific group of sites or features, such as the Uist Crannog survey, it is better to over-estimate potential sites from desk-based exercises, but to ensure sites are visited to physically check out the reality of the field findings.

Sources and References

Bald, William (surveyed 1805) *Plan of the Island of Benbecula, the property of Ranald George McDonald Esq of Clanranald.* Available from National Records of Scotland, Ref. RHP3028 as digital scan or on-site scrutiny at NRS Search Rooms.

Crawford, Ian A. (1966) 'Creagorry, Benbecula', *Discovery & Excavation Scotland*, 1966. Page 28

ESRI Satellite imagery available online at National Library of Scotland https://maps.nls.uk/

Garrow, Duncan Sturt, Fraser & Gannon, Angela (2020 , ongoing) *The Islands of Stone project,* online at https://crannogs.soton.ac.uk/