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School of Environmental Science
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Coleraine

Data Structure Report No. 032

Portcastle, Rathlin Island
Rathlin Island Research Project
AE/04/92



Portcastle
Rathlin Island
Peter Moore and Wes Forsythe

CAF DSR 032
AE/04/92
Grid Ref: D 1626 5149

1. Summary

1.1 Background

1.1.1 An archaeological excavation was undertaken at Portcastle (Figure One) as part of the Rathlin Island Research Project from the 24th May to 18th June 2004. The project was undertaken by the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork (Queen's University Belfast), in partnership with the Centre for Maritime Archaeology (University of Ulster Coleraine) on behalf of the Environment and Heritage Service: Built Heritage.

1.1.2 Two field seasons of coastal survey work undertaken by the Centre for Maritime Archaeology (UUC) had mapped and documented approximately 200 sites around the island shore. The excavation at Portcastle represented part of the second phase of work on the island, with the investigation designed to test whether the area has any archaeological remains.

1.2 Excavation

1.2.1 The excavation took place toward the end of the project and was carried out by hand. Evidence of past activity in the immediate area includes cultivation ridges and kelp drying walls and a laneway, while Bruce's Castle is located on higher ground to the north.

1.2.2 A single trench measuring 3m x 1m was opened 3.5m behind the kelp-drying walls at the top of the beach (Trench One). As so little of the area was opened a test pit (1 x 1m) was opened to the north in an area of slump 2.15m behind a landing place on the beach (Trench Two). On removal of the topsoil excavation quickly came down on large rounded beach stones similar to those on the beach. This was interpreted as natural and excavation stopped.

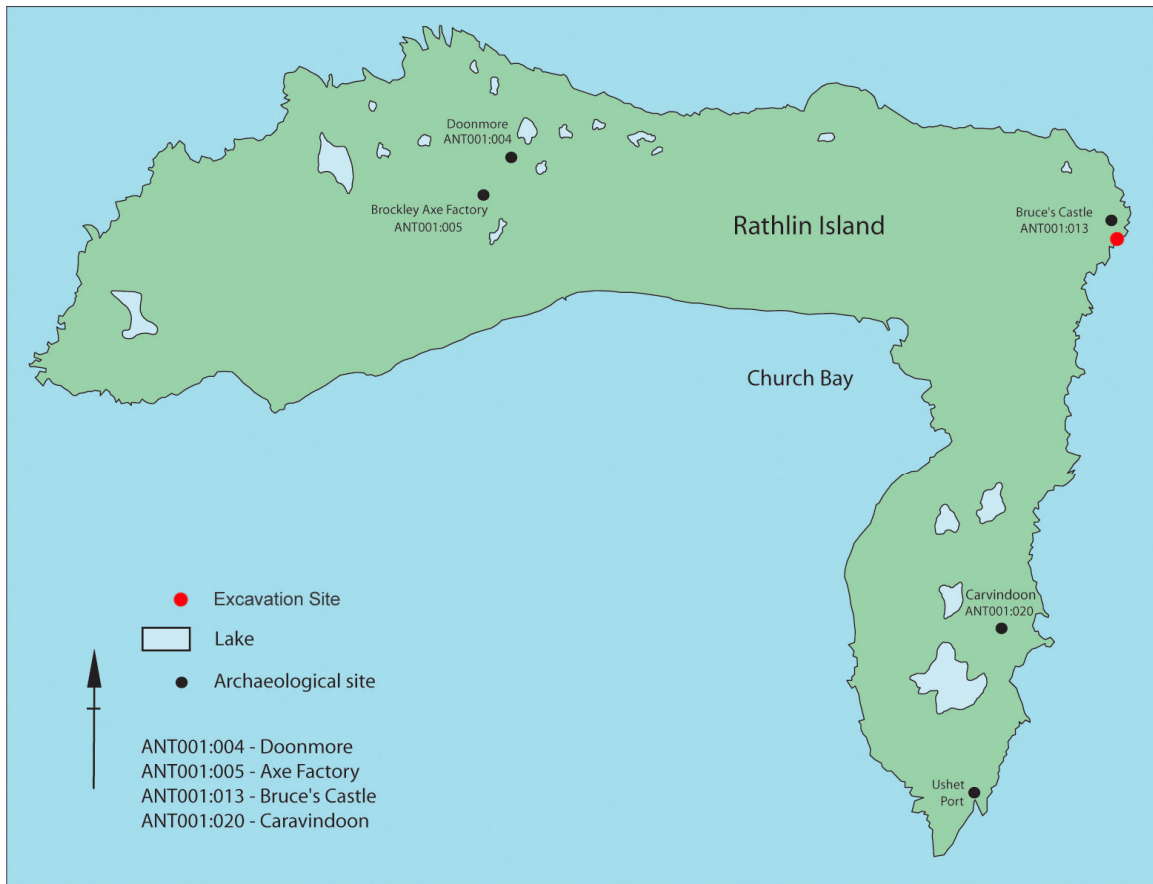


Figure One: Rathlin Island location map

2. Background

2.1 General

2.1.1 The Rathlin Island archaeological survey is a maritime project, involving the recording of all sites on the shore. These include landing places associated with fishing, trade and the kelp industry.

2.2.2 In 1551 Irish and Scots under *Colla McDonnell* were occupying Bruce's Castle when 3 - 4 English pinnaces – under the command of Sir Ralph Bagnall and Captain Cuffe – attempted to displace them. Accounts mention that the Scots had pulled their galleys onto the shore at the place where the action occurred a place known as *Port-na-Sassanach*.¹ As the English were maneuvering into a firing position on the galleys they were swept by the current onto the rocks and the local forces won the encounter. The location is probably Portcastle – located below Bruce's Castle – and test trenching here aimed to establish whether anything remains of this recorded activity. In particular, the excavation was designed to determine whether the landing place was only used as such, or whether maintenance and repairs were being carried out.

2.2.3 The landing place comprises a natural boulder shore, met by a grassy bank upon which the remains of lazy beds can be detected. To the west there is a scarp to higher ground, together with a laneway inland to the south. The prominent rock at the shore end of the laneway is known as Gunner's Rock, hinting at military activity here as well as the castle (Figure Two).

2.3 Other Sites in the vicinity

2.3.1 Situated north and south of the site are a number of kilns and walls associated with the 18th and 19th century kelp-making activity on the island (MRA 3:1-5). There is also one boat shelter (MRA 3:6) to the south (Figure Two).

¹ Clark 1996; *Dublin Penny Journal* 27/7/1833; McCahan 1923

2.4 *Research Objectives*

2.4.1 The aim of the excavation at Portcastle was to ascertain the presence and character of any archaeological deposits associated with its function as a landing place.

2.5 *Archiving*

2.5.1 Copies of this report have been deposited with the Environment and Heritage Service: Built Heritage. All site records and finds are temporarily archived within the School of Archaeology and Palaeoecology (Queen's University Belfast), and the Centre for Maritime Archaeology (University of Ulster Coleraine).

2.6 *Credits and Acknowledgments*

2.6.1 The excavation was directed by Peter Moore and Wes Forsythe. The excavation team consisted of Claire McGranaghan, Brian Sloan, Eamon Donaghy and Naomi Carver.

2.6.2 Assistance during the course of the excavation and the preparation of this report was kindly provided by: Dr Colm Donnelly, Keith Adams and Ruth Logue (CAF), Sinéad McCartan (UM), Dr Brian Williams (EHS) and Mr Joseph McQuilkin (landowner).

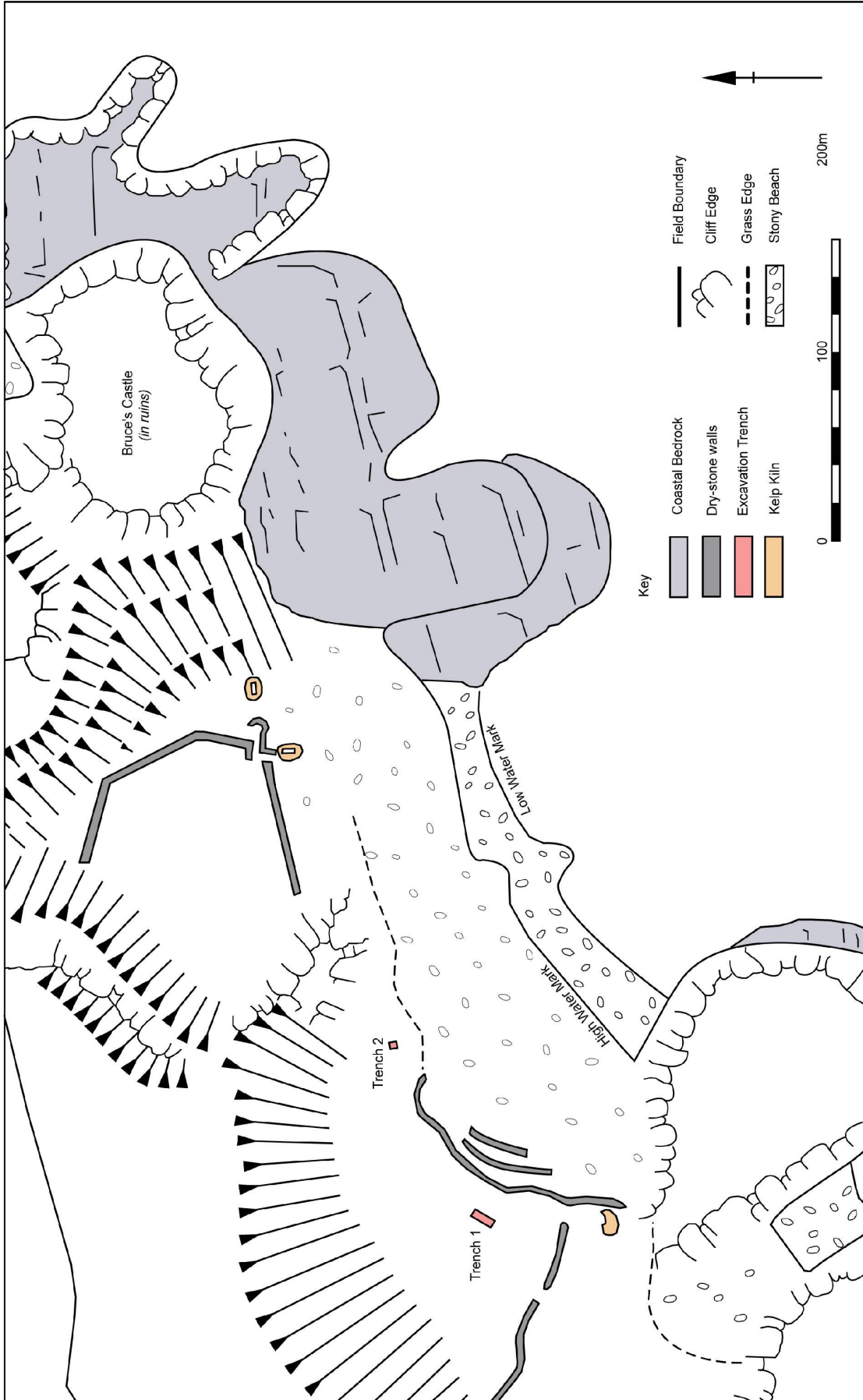


Figure Two: Map showing 2004 trench locations and excavation position in relation to Bruce's Castle

3. Excavation

3.1 Methodology

3.1.1 The programme of work at Portcastle involved an archaeological investigation of a trench and test pit. The trench measured 3 metres (approximately north-east / south-west) and 1 metre wide. The test pit was 1 x 1m.

3.1.2 Following the removal of loose stone the excavation of the archaeological strata was undertaken by hand using standard context recording methods. The principal site records consisted of context sheets, field notes, photographs and a drawn record. Plans (Scale 1:20) were prepared, with section drawings (Scales 1:10 and 1:20) made on completion of the excavation. For details of site photography see Appendix Three and for details of field illustrations see Appendix Four. The unique site code used to identify the records generated during the excavation was 'PC 04'.

3.2 Account of the excavations

Trench One

3.2.1 Upon removal of the sod, the uppermost context (C.101) was a brown loam with sub-rounded / angular stones that contained fragments of modern china. This deposit was excavated to a depth of 0.23m (0.14m thick). Situated below C. 101 were rounded stones (C. 102) becoming compact and damp with soil or cavities in the interstices. The appearance was much like natural beach boulders and a sondage at the north-east end of the trench took the layer down a further 0.35m. No change or archaeological material was forthcoming, with only a few flecks of charcoal. The layer was judged to be natural and excavation stopped (Figures Three and Four).

Trench Two

3.2.2 The test pit revealed a similar stratigraphy to that recorded in Trench One. However, the layers were deeper, reflecting a slump of material from the above slope. Context 201 was a brown loam with mainly angular stones (60%). Toward

the base of the deposit (at 0.34m depth), a badly corroded nail was found. Situated below this a dark-brown gritty loam (C.202). This was excavated to a depth of 0.48m and bottomed by large boulders like those at the top of the beach. The boulders were packed relatively tightly and a few water-rolled boulders found at the base confirmed the pit was open to the natural beach level. Excavation stopped at 0.86m deep on these natural boulders (Plate One: Figure Five).

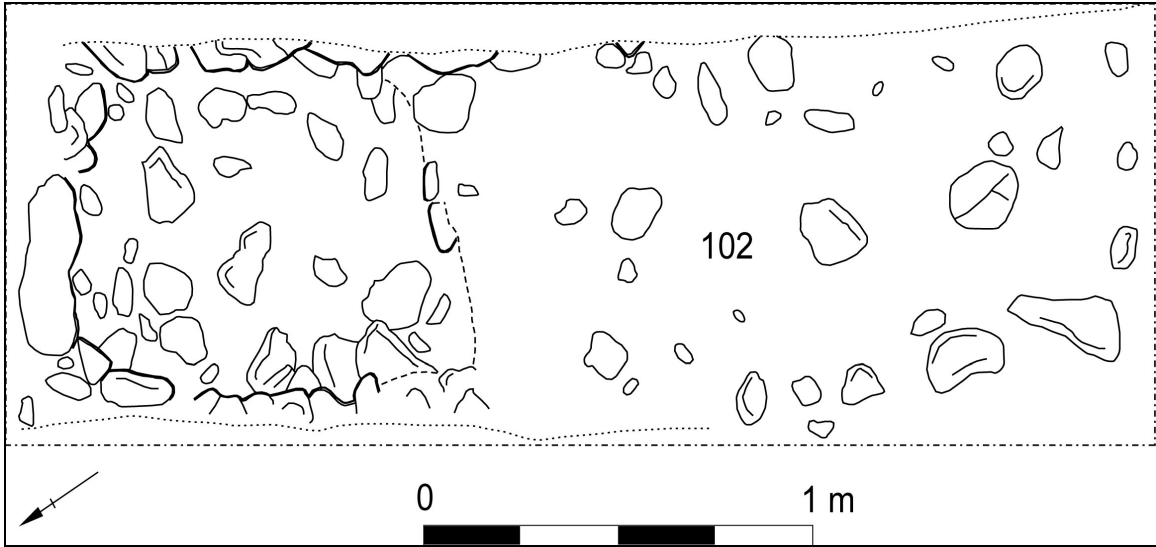


Figure Three: Plan of Trench One

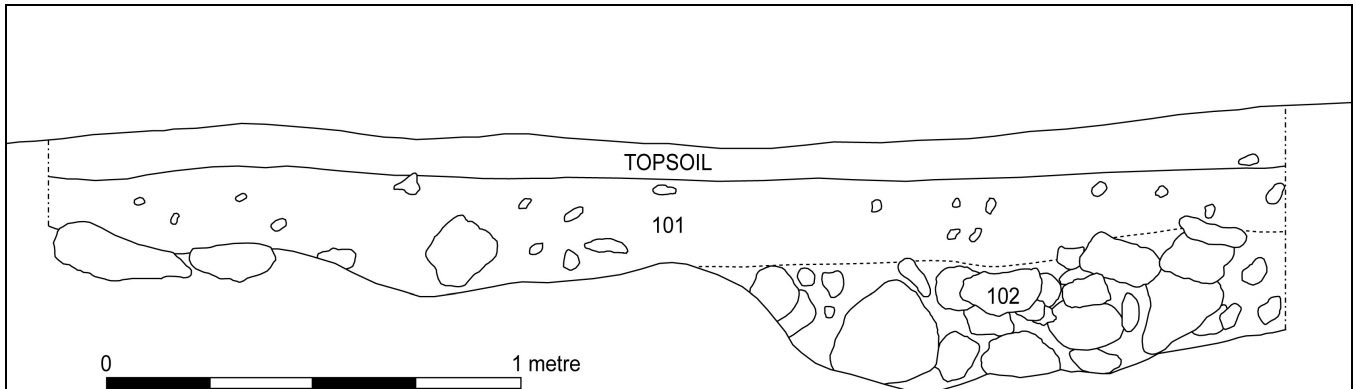


Figure Four: Section of Trench One



Plate One: Base of Trench Two (looking west)

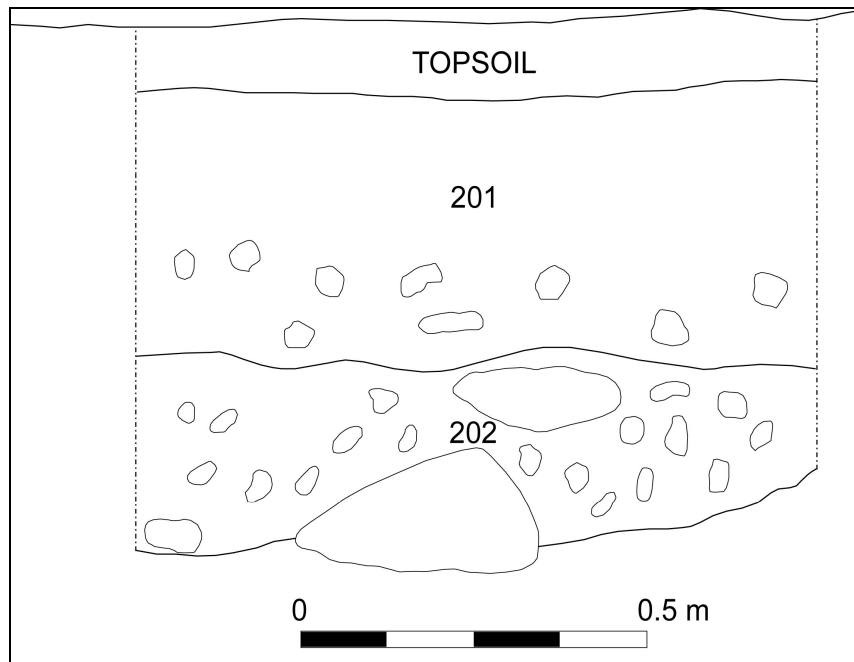


Figure Five: Section of Trench Two

4. Discussion

- 4.1.1 The excavation did not yield material that would indicate the use of the area as a landing place, and would tend to strengthen the view that no building or repairs to ships were carried out on this site. Although the single nail recovered might provide dating evidence, its association with the slump material recorded in Trench Two means it cannot securely date the deposits from the excavation trenches.

5. Recommendations for further work

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 The results of the 2004 trial excavation at Portcastle will be discussed within a wider chapter on the medieval site at Bruce's Castle in the Rathlin Island monograph which will present all the findings of the survey.

5.2 Future excavation and survey

5.2.1 Test excavation at Portcastle did not record significant archaeological deposits and showed a relatively shallow soil layer over the natural beach boulders. Any future work could focus on the area to the north – directly under the castle – which was rejected this season as the landing place there would have been more difficult to access. Some geophysical (preferably resistivity) survey would be desirable to detect any potential archaeological features in this area before any further excavation programme commenced.

Appendix One: Context Log

Trench One

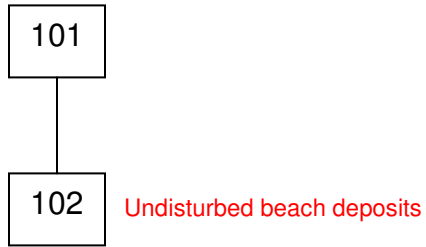
<i>Context No.</i>	<i>Description</i>
101	Brown loam with sub-rounded and angular stone inclusions
102	Rounded stone beach boulders

Trench Two

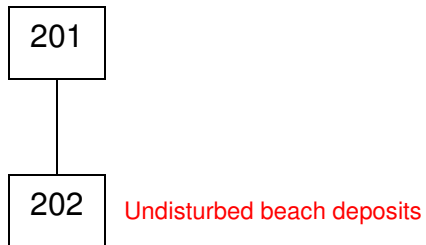
<i>Context No.</i>	<i>Description</i>
201	Brown loam containing angular stones
202	Dark-brown gritty loam bottomed by rounded stone beach boulders

Appendix Two: Harris Matrix

Trench One



Trench Two



Appendix Three: Photographic Record

<i>Photograph No.</i>	<i>Notes / Description</i>
01	Trench One – Section looking north
02	Trench One – looking east
03	Trench One – north end looking west
04	Trench Two – looking west
05	Trench Two – large stone at the base of the trench
06	Nail recovered from Trench Two
07	As Above

Appendix Four: Field Drawing Register

<i>Drawing No.</i>	<i>Scale</i>	<i>Plan / Section</i>	<i>Notes / Description</i>
01	1:20	Plan	Plan showing Trench One C.102, position of sondage
02	1:10	Section	E facing section showing Trench Two C.201, C.202
03	1:10	Section	E facing section showing Trench One C.101, C.102
04	1:20	Plan	Plan showing Trench Two C.202