Eilean Donan Castle

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Eilean Donan Castle is a medieval icon of the Highlands, situated at the convluence of three sea lochs in Wester Ross. Much of the present castle is a reconstruction from the early 20th century, but the castle has a long history. It has been the subject of archaeological research by FAS Heritage since 2007, involving field survey and open excavation. Evidence for the establishment of a castle in the 13th century exists and Timothy Pont’s survey describes it in terms of folk memory by 1580, remarking that it was a ‘fair dungeon’ set upon a work, with a tower encompassed by a wall, though it was said of old that the castle had seven towers (Pont 121v-122r, available on maps.nls.uk). FAS fieldwork has defined four of the lost towers including the northwest tower and two interval towers, as well as defining the west and north curtain wall and timber buildings inside them.

People living at Eilean Donan were largely provisioned with food providing a view of the nature and strategies of the rural hinterland. Foodstuffs include the normal farmyard animals supplemented by hunted and caught food – venison, ducks and other wild birds. A wide range of seafood was exploited, recovered along with lead fishing weights and iron hooks. Crops such as oats and barley indicated in the environmental data must also have been supplies as provisions.

Personal items include copper-alloy stick pins for fastening clothing, a small ring brooch, decorative strap ends, coins and knives with decorative handles. Evidence for play and pastimes is common. As well as diverse evidence for hunting, a small buzz bone or snaring bone, an iron jaw harp and four gaming pieces show us that games, music and play were part of life.

The most striking artefact recovered to date is undoubtedly the antler *gravoir* or hair parter. The *gravoir* belongs to a small pan-European group of decorative high status items which includes decorated knife handles; this is the only known example from medieval Scotland with very few examples from Britain. Made from the tine of a red deer antler, the *gravoir* would have been used to style a lady’s hair and dates to the 14th century. The artefact has been examined by Mark Hall who has compared it to the European corpus. The consumption of high medieval culture was clearly enjoyed in the West Highlands and its Parisian overtones would not have been lost on the owner.

Later activity in the outer ward takes a completely different character and is heavily weighted towards craftworking. Evidence for iron smithing has also been encountered on a significant scale, enough for the site of an armoury to be identified within the castle defined by a significant presence of *in situ* hammerscale mapped across an area of concentration identified as a working floor surface with the position of an anvil implied. Assemblages which were closely associated with the building include a large amount of very large smithing cakes accompanied by a near-complete large rotary grindstone. A burnt nutshell from this floor returned a radiocarbon date of AD1450-1640 (95.4%). Small groups of chainmail from mail garments as well as armour-piercing arrowheads or cross-bow bolts indicate that further military equipment may have been repaired or produced.

The ironworking is contemporary with working of non-ferrous metals evidence which takes the form of over 60 fragments of vitrified crucible fragments recovered primarily from a late medieval midden heap. The fragments belong to small capacity crucibles of which we have rim and base fragments in forms which are virtually indistinguishable from the late Iron Age/Early Historic forms; comparable assemblages of this date have not yet been identified.

Lastly, evidence for boat building and/or repairing has been identified in the assemblages. Strips of unfinished roves have been recovered and are joined by clench bolts and large spike nails which strongly signal that shipwrights were also working at the castle.

In the broader context of the West Highlands the results from Eilean Donan Castle can claim some rich connections. The presence of craftworkers was also identified during excavations at the seat of the Lord of the Isles, Finlaggan Castle on Islay, by David Caldwell. These craftworkers, which at Eilean Donan included swordsmiths and shipwrights, are probably connected to the notable upsurge in evidence for late medieval ironworking evidence such as has also been found at Portmahomack. The late medieval craftsmen also form a backdrop to the emergence of a professional caste of warrior and the distinctive West Highland art which adorns their funerary monuments (Steer and Bannerman 1977; Caldwell et al 2010).