

## THE SOUTERRAINS ON SKYE

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Skye is the largest and most northerly of the Inner Hebridean islands which lie off the north-west coast of Scotland. There are one thousand miles of coastline which enclose peat moorlands and green valleys set against the rugged Black Cuillin mountains of gabbro and the rounded granitic Red Hills.

When trying to look at any prehistory on this island you come up with one main problem and that is a total lack of research and literature on most of the prehistoric structures. This is even more so when trying to find out about the souterrain which has also been plagued with a problem of terminology. The Pict's House and Earth House are both common names for the souterrain. The Rev Lamont in his marvellous book "Strath, in the Isle of Skye", talks about the chambered cairn race of people using these structures as dwellings in the winter and then talks about Pictish children sneaking out of these after a stormy night. These vague and faulty labels channel one's thoughts in the wrong direction as to the origins and uses of these underground structures, although if we are primarily concerned with the structures themselves rather than false labels then we need not be misled.

We can divide souterrains into five main classes based on the construction techniques, namely:

1. Tunnelling into rock or clay
2. Use of natural features, cave or fissure
3. Wooded construction in an open-topped trench
4. Dry stone building with an open-topped trench
5. Incorporating the souterrain within the rampart or wall of an enclosure

All of the Skye examples without exception fall into the dry stone building class.

The problem of what other souterrains were used for cannot be dealt with in much detail in this article. I will put my points forward regarding the Skye souterrain only and compare it generally with what can be seen in the rest of Scotland. It would be totally wrong to believe that these belong to the same period as those in the rest of Scotland and Ireland and that they all served the same purpose, and to even assume they were built by the same type of people. It was F T Wainwright

# SOUTERRAINS OF SKYE

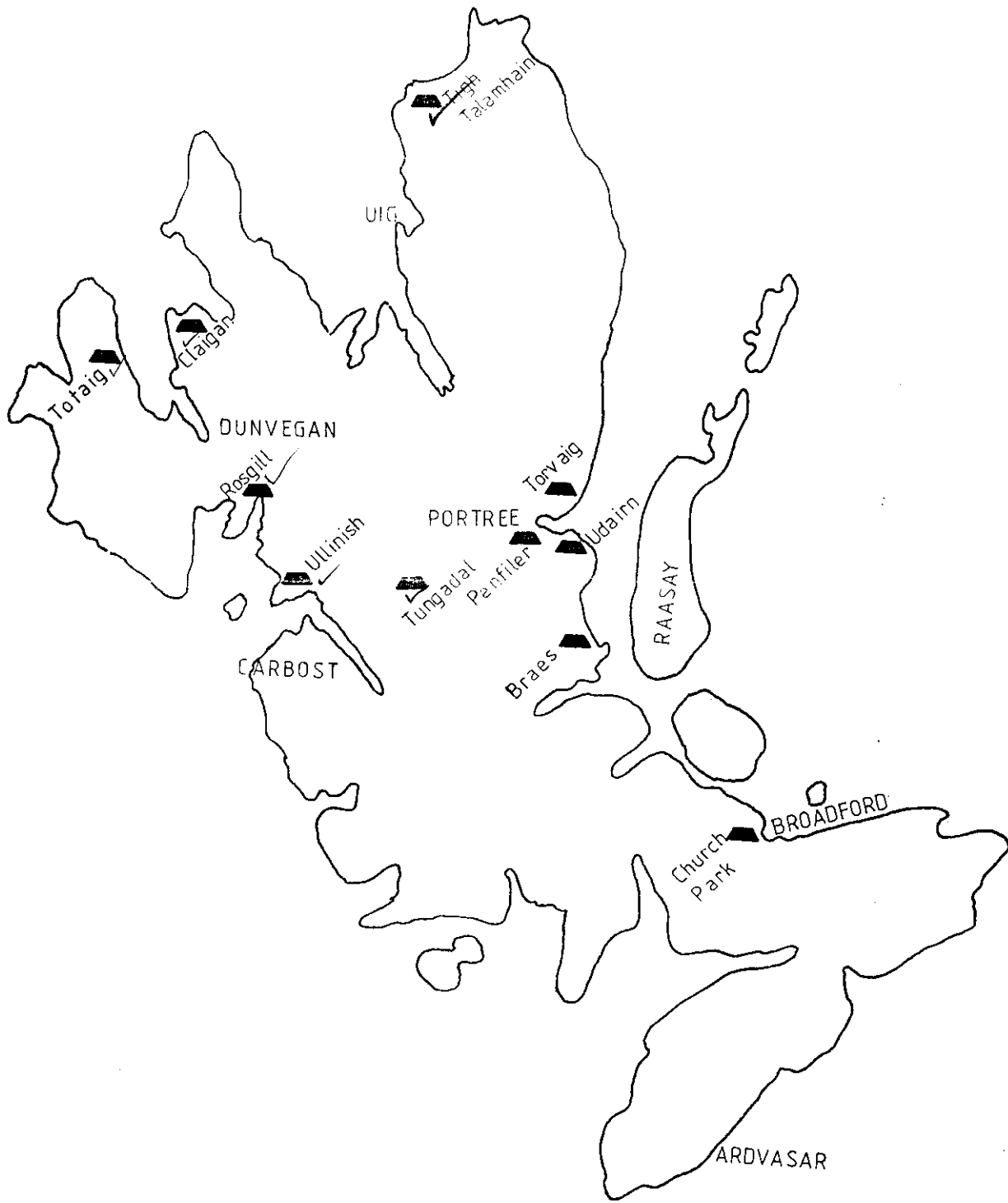


FIG. 1

who pointed out that we should not assume that all underground structures belong to a single undivided class; as we do not classify all buildings above ground with one origin we should not do so with these underground structures.

### DISTRIBUTION

Figure 1 shows a map of the distribution on Skye of the souterrain. I am sure there should be many more which have not been found as yet or are totally destroyed, but this is all we have at present.

The map appears to show a distribution with slightly more in the north and west. This is an interesting point in that most of our prehistoric structures on Skye are located in this area. As a side-line here for a moment, I have often wondered why the north and west of the island shows the most diversity of prehistoric structures if the early Neolithic and Beaker people came from the Rhine and Low Countries. One would expect the opposite sort of picture with a profusion of structures in the south.

### THE SOUTERRAINS

Out of the eleven structures on the island, only four are described in detail below. The others are recorded in old journals with scanty directions and although time has been spent looking for them not all have been found. Those that have are in a very poor state and it is therefore only possible to give detailed descriptions and plans for the four best preserved. The remainder will be described briefly at the end of this section.

#### Ullinish (Figure 2)

NG 333:385

NG 33 NW 0002

Situated:  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile north of Struan

This structure is partly destroyed but what remains is in good order. It consists of a passage going in 3.9 m with an average height of 0.92 m and width of 0.9 m.

The walls comprise blocks of local Tertiary basalt and are all dry stone. Lintel stones cover the roof and these are large thin slabs of the basalt lava measuring

ULLINISH

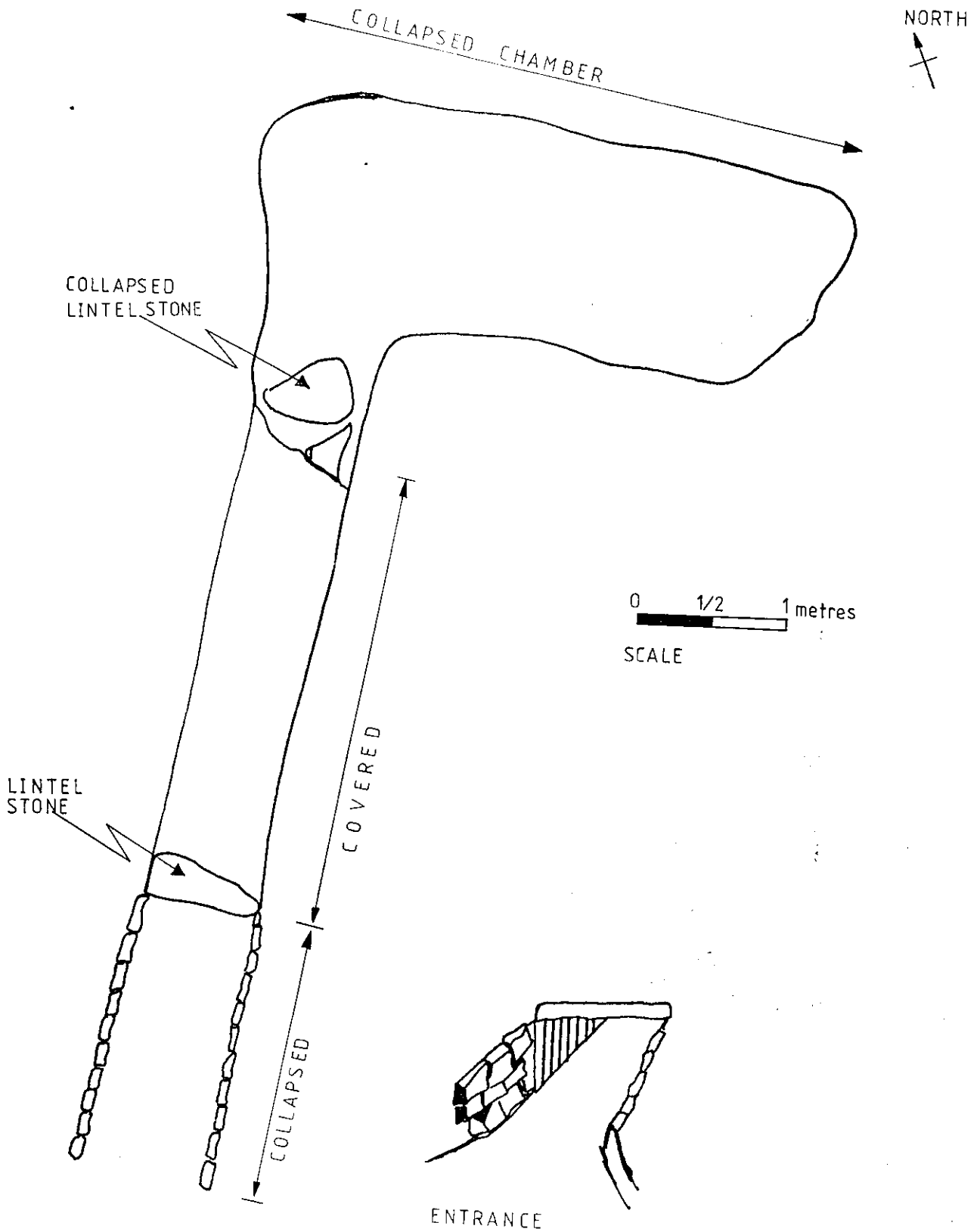


FIG. 2 ✓

about 70 cm long, 50 cm wide and 10 cm thick. The floor is bare earth.

The structure has two collapsed areas: the first section and also evidence of an oval chamber near the rear. This can be seen clearly on the diagram.

✓Claigan (Figure 3)

NG 238:539

NG 25 SW 0002

Situated: 4 miles north of Dunvegan

One of the best preserved structures on Skye which consists of a passage 9.8 m long which climbs by about  $4-5^{\circ}$  and narrows towards the end of the passage. The structure is made of dry stone basalt blocks with large lintel stones.

An interesting feature is a small compartment situated  $\frac{1}{2}$  m in from the entrance, the dimensions of which are 40 cm wide, 50 cm high and 37 cm deep.

In the surrounding area there is evidence of habitation on a small scale, possibly 3 or 4 houses, although it is very difficult to assess.

✓Tungadal (Figure 4)

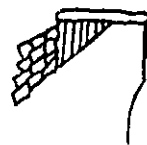
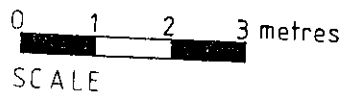
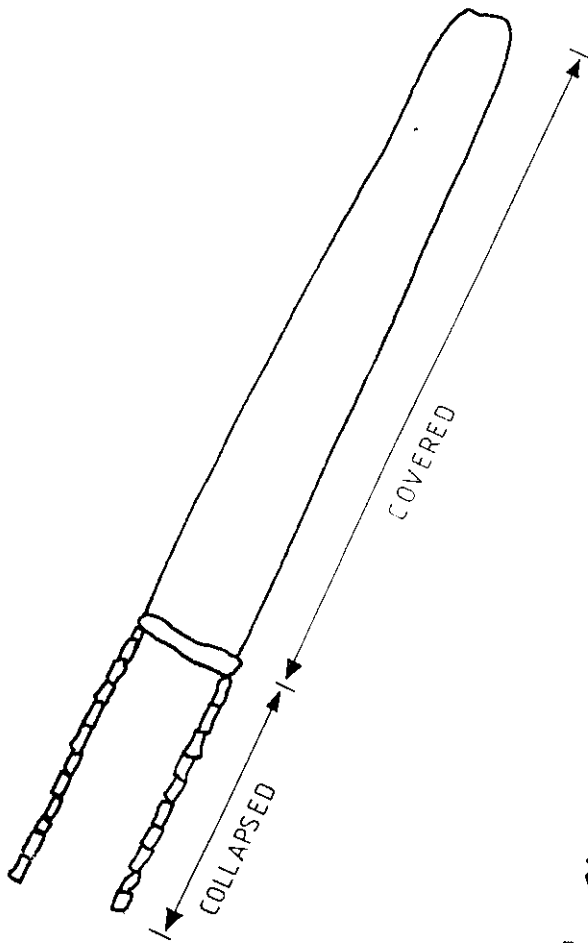
NG 407:401

Situated: Near Loch Duagrigh

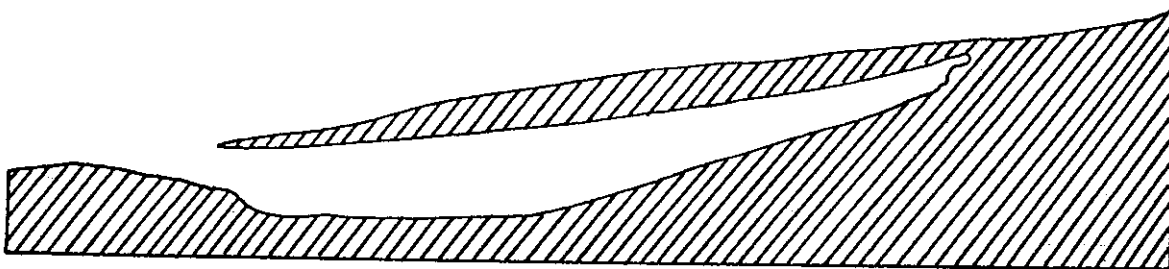
This souterrain is very similar to Claigan, consisting of 8 m of lintelled dry walled passage with an average height of 97 cm and an average width of 81 cm.

There are three interesting features in this souterrain, two of which are not seen elsewhere on Skye: firstly, there is a small compartment, very like that in Claigan, which is situated 67 cm from the entrance, as shown on the diagram; secondly, the construction differs from the others in that not only dry stone walling has been used as in places large blocks only are used to support the lintels; finally, there appears to be a ventilation shaft near the rear of the structure.

# CLAIGAN



ENTRANCE



CROSS SECTION

FIG. 3

# TUNGADAL

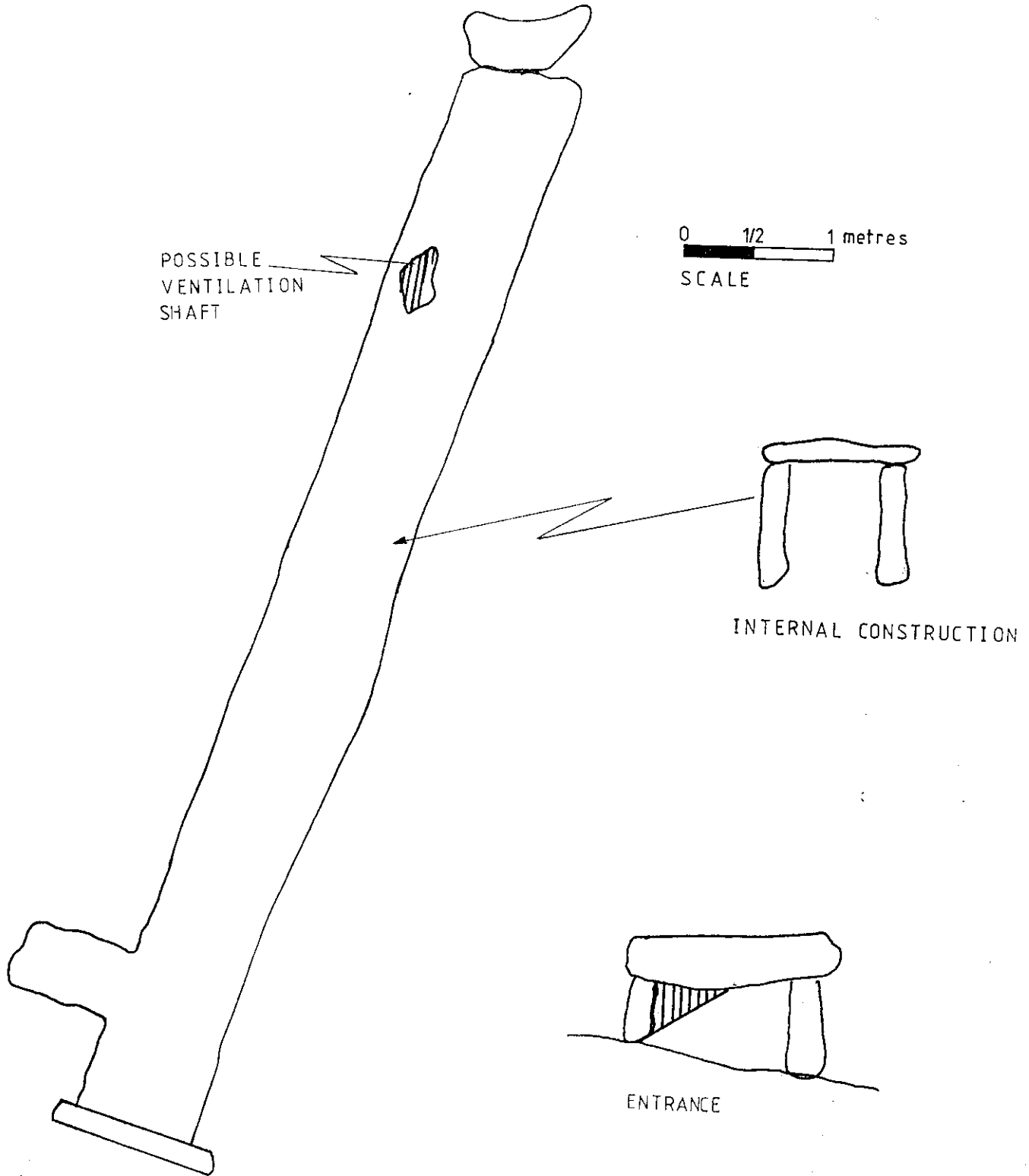


FIG. 4.

Tigh Talamhain

NG 405:695

Situated: Glen Sneosdal, 5 miles north of Uig off the Heribusta road

This souterrain is situated in the remote area of Glen Sneosdal and is completely collapsed. The outline of the structure can be roughly seen to consist of a passage about 8 m long and 1 m wide. From what can be seen it comprises a crude dry stone walling although no height or internal layout can be observed.

Others

Evidence for the rest of the souterrains on Skye is difficult as some show no trace today. The only evidence lies in records in old journals, the authenticity of which cannot be checked but they are listed below with some comments:

Rosgill

NG 282:449

The entrance is in a bank overhanging the burn. It is very difficult to locate as it is totally collapsed.

Totaig

NG 203:502

There is no trace of building. A deep hollow marks the inner chamber and at least two side chambers are still intact, although most of the structure is choked.

Braes

No definite location

This was discovered when a plough struck roof stones and it consists of a long passage curving round to form a semi-circle.



Penifiler

No definite location

Destroyed between 1925 and 1927. When it was opened peat ashes were found at the end of the passage.

Church Park, Broadford

"A walled cavern was discovered in the church park not half a century ago (1913). So far examined by the late Dr Sutherland it appears to be one of these earth dwellings which Dr MacIntosh believes were built by these people of the chambered cairns.

The entrance was about 4 ft wide, the sides being built of unhewn stone, converging and roofed as in other similar dwellings. It is believed inhabitants of the Stone Age lived here only in the severest weather." (Lamont)

The other souterrains located on the map only have a brief mention in literature.

AGE, USE AND ORIGINS

Without exception all the souterrains are built of dry stone walling in a dug out trench and all are associated with a settlement. These are generally small with no more than three, four or five dwellings and in most cases undefended with no fortified structure near the structures.

They have a long restricted passage with extremely difficult access through a low entrance. This is the general framework from which we have to build up an idea of the age, use and origin.

Although the concept of the souterrain is in fact much older than the Iron Age, the Skye examples are not unlike the Iron Age structures. However, as no archaeological work has been undertaken on them and no remains found we have little to go on, other than comparing them with other similar structures, so that a late Iron Age date for these Skye examples can only be postulated.

The purpose of these structures has been the subject of much debate. I have my own views on the Skye examples but will firstly try to eliminate other possible uses. The popular main contenders are:

1. Storage
2. Dwellings
3. Animal Shelters
4. Refuge

1. Storage: Many of the souterrains in south east Scotland are roomy, paved and well drained and the storage idea fits in very well. However on Skye we have low entrances, narrow low passages, no pavement and waterlogged earthen floors so that the use for storage is out of the question.
2. Dwellings: The "Earth House" concept I think can also be dismissed without further comment.
3. Animal Shelters: Again, we do not really have the room for such a shelter and the narrow passages do not favour such an argument. On a design principle this is "no go" and I do not think our Iron Age forefathers practised the inhumane way of battery farming that we do at present.
4. Refuge: Maybe by just a process of elimination, or perhaps an alternative answer still has to be found, but in my mind the only logical use for the Skye souterrains is a refuge. The size of them, the way in which they are all associated with a small community and would all have been well hidden when complete all point to this answer.

If a small group of farms do not possess any obvious defended structure they would have needed somewhere to hide their valuables and women and children at times of siege.

I am not suggesting that continual battles were raging, rather they would have been used when cattle raiders, call them what you will, were evident in the distance. Surely such a structure would give greater security to a small community who do not have the protection of castles, etc.

It could be argued on the other hand that these structures would be traps and the occupants could be smoked or starved out. This argument could equally be made for any defensive structure and any raiding party with enough supplies could easily overcome them. However, the main problem for these small Highland communities would have been "hit and run" attacks by small bands of cattle raiders hardly likely to wait around as this would have put their own families in danger from neighbouring raiders.

With regard to the small chamber structures in two of the Skye souterrains, it is difficult to give a definite use for these. It could be that they were further hiding places for valuables or storage places for food and drink for use whenever the souterrain was occupied.

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