

Case information

Case ID	300018097
File Reference	AMJ/9339/1/1
Name of Site	Cnoc Coig, shell midden 430m NNW of Seal Cottage

Local Authority	Argyll and Bute
National Grid Reference	NR 36046 88573
Designation No. (if any)	SM13655
Case Type	Designation

Received/Start Date	01/09/2013
Decision Date	10/10/2016

1. Decision

The assessment against criteria demonstrates that the monument is of national importance. The decision is to add the monument to the schedule of nationally important monuments as **Cnoc Coig, shell midden 430m NNW of Seal Cottage**.

2. Designation Background and Development Proposals

2.1 Designation Background

The Cnoc Coig midden is currently undesignated. A reported midden site 215m to the south was scheduled in 1996 as SM6289. However, a review in 2013 of SM6289 concluded that the scheduled area had been mislocated. SM6289 was removed from the schedule on 15/06/2016. The review concluded that the original intention had been to schedule the site referred to in this proposal.

The monument lies within the boundaries of the Oronsay and South Colonsay Site of Special Scientific Interest, the Oronsay Special Area of Conservation, and the Oronsay and South Colonsay Special Protection Area.

2.2 Development Proposals

There are no known development proposals which would affect this assessment.

3. Assessment

3.1 Assessment information

The site was considered for designation as part of a review of scheduled monuments in Oronsay and Colonsay during September 2013. The site was visited on 02/09/2013.

3.2 Assessment against designation criteria

An assessment of the cultural significance of the site has been carried out following the criteria set out in the Historic Environment Scotland policy statement June 2016 (Annex 1 paras 3-6). Having assessed cultural significance, the site was found to meet the criteria for national importance as set out in Annex 1 para 10.

Having considered the purpose and implications of designating, it has been concluded that scheduling is the most appropriate mechanism to protect the site.

Please see Annex A of this document for further information about this assessment.

The designation criteria are published in the Historic Environment Scotland policy statement June 2016, Annex 1, pp. 48-50.

<https://www.historicenvironment.scot/advice-and-support/planning-and-guidance/legislation-and-guidance/historic-environment-scotland-policy-statement/>

3.3 Other considerations

N/A

Elizabeth McCrone

Head of Designations
Heritage Management
Historic Environment Scotland

Contact	Sam Fox, Designations Officer; sam.fox@hes.scot ; 0131 668 8600
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ANNEX A – Assessment Against the Scheduling Criteria

Cnoc Coig, Shell Midden 430m NNW of Seal Cottage

1 Description

The monument is a partially excavated prehistoric shell midden probably formed during the late Mesolithic around 4500BC. The midden is visible as a low grass-covered mound rising to around 1-2m above ground level. Excavations indicated that the midden is irregular in plan form, measuring approximately 25m in diameter from northwest to southeast and 20m from northeast to southwest. The monument is located at around 10m above OD in an area of sand dunes and rocky outcrops approximately 220m inland from the east coast of the island of Oronsay at Port na h-Athalt.

The scheduled area is irregular on plan to include the remains described above and an area around them within which evidence relating to the monument's construction, use and abandonment is expected to survive, as shown in red on the accompanying map.

2 Assessment Against the Scheduling Criteria (Historic Environment Scotland policy statement June 2016, Annex 1, pp. 48-50.)

2.1 Intrinsic Characteristics

The site was the subject of antiquarian investigations probably in the 1880s and early 1900s. A more substantial excavation during the 1970s recovered around 70-75% of the midden material, identifying hearths, stone-filled post holes and other features. Additionally human skeletal remains, lithic and organic artefacts including stone limpet hammers, anvil stones and bone implements were also recovered. The remains of backfilled trenches can be seen on the ground surface. However, as the excavations were incomplete, substantial midden deposits are expected to survive. This is further evidenced by concentrations of midden material exposed in rabbit burrows across the monument. These remains can enhance our knowledge about how Mesolithic settlers lived in the area.

The monument represents a focal point for coastal resource gathering during early-prehistory with a high potential to support future research into the prehistoric occupation of Oronsay and the islands of western Scotland. Scientific dating of organic material recovered from the earliest phase of Cnoc Coig provides an approximate date for the initial deposition of midden material between around 4515 and 4495 BC. The uppermost layer is likely representative of the later phase of occupation around 4340 BC. The site of Cnoc Coig appears to have been occupied at a later date and for a shorter time period in comparison with other prehistoric middens on Oronsay.

2.2 Contextual Characteristics

Cnoc Coig retains high potential to improve our knowledge about the environment at the time which was much different to that today. Borehole samples have suggested that the monument was formed on a sand dune that would have lain adjacent to the coastline. A study of land molluscs suggest the area was also under dense vegetation or woodland. This location would have provided a ready supply of shellfish and other marine resources for the population of Mesolithic and Neolithic Oronsay.

Today the midden lies on the southwestern side of a low rocky outcrop, amongst relict sand dunes and raised beach deposits. Thick gorse surrounds the monument on its northwestern, western, southwestern and southern sides. There are views to the east and southeast from the monument towards the present day coastline, which has moved approximately 200m in these directions since the monument's formation.

This is an important site in a coastal landscape on Oronsay that appears to have been intensively exploited during the late Mesolithic. As a group, these sites provide key evidence for Mesolithic settlement of the islands of western Scotland. In addition to Cnoc Coig, there are two extensive middens known as Caisteal nan Gilleann I & II (SM6288) located approximately 600 m to the south-southwest of the monument, and a third midden known as Cnoc Sligeach (SM13580) located approximately 1.3km to the east-northeast. A fourth midden, Cnoc Rioch (Canmore ID 37800), is recorded 500m to the northeast of the monument. By comparison with these, Cnoc Coig has a lower profile.

Although other Mesolithic sites are recorded on the nearby islands of Colonsay, Islay, Jura, Coll and Mull, the only known and comparable monument in form and in the extent of the recorded assemblage of artefacts outside of Oronsay is the shell midden on Risga (SM7829), Loch Sunart, approximately 40km to the north of Oronsay.

2.3 Associative Characteristics

The first investigations of Cnoc Coig may have been undertaken in the early 1880s with finds displayed at the International Fisheries Exhibition in 1883, but since lost. The monument was later investigated by Bishop and Buchanan in 1911, who referred to the site as the 'Viking mound' - or 'Druim Harstell' – due to a ring-headed pin recovered early in their investigation. Archives from these investigations are held in the collections of the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow. The excavations undertaken by Mellars in the 1970s are well documented and, taken together with more recently published scientific analysis of the Oronsay middens, have significantly added to our consciousness of Mesolithic hunter gatherers in Scotland.

3 Purpose and implications of scheduling

The monument is in a stable condition and has few management issues apart from gorse growth. The monument lies within an area protected for nature conservation purposes. Designation as a scheduled monument is the most appropriate

mechanism to secure the preservation of Cnoc Coig, and ensure the recognition of its national importance as a historic environment asset.

4 Assessment of national importance

The monument is of national importance because of its potential to make a significant addition to our understanding of how Mesolithic settlers of the Inner Hebrides lived. Although there have been various phases of excavation on the site, substantial archaeological deposits are expected to survive undisturbed. The potential for survival of artefacts, environmental samples and structural features means that this monument can also provide insight into the relatively understudied transition from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic. Its importance is enhanced by its association with the wider coastal landscape of prehistoric midden sites on Oronsay, one of the largest concentrations of such sites in the UK. Our understanding of the distribution and character of shell middens and methods for gathering coastal and marine resources in prehistoric Scotland would be diminished if this monument were lost or damaged.

5 References

Historic Environment Scotland <http://www.canmore.org.uk> reference number Canmore ID 37818 (accessed on 13/06/2016).

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