

CEBAC community archaeology walks No 5

*'How far have I fallen from you, sweetheart of my youth:
with your brown hair and your dark eyes,
each mound and hollow that I did not know, did not feel,
Mùirneag in early June,
and Mèalaiseal and Swordale Moor,
and Loch nan Ruigheannan with its arms
clasped around me.'*

Derek Thomson, 'Sweetheart of my Youth' (Macaulay 1976, 162)

The walk to Muirneag was much anticipated, maybe with a small amount of trepidation. Amazingly however we had perfect weather again – sunny with a breeze to keep the midges off, which was just as well!

It is a long way to Muirneag no matter where you start. We started at the top of the peat road, part way up the Gress river, the mid-point of walk 4. We travelled there in vans and tractors. From there we went up the river for 4 km, before branching off to the north up a tributary, the Allt a' Deas Muirneag which springs from the foot of the hill proper. All in all it was only around 7 km to the top by this route, although it certainly felt a lot longer!

This was partly due to the sheer number of Airigh we encountered - we were literally tripping up over them all the way out. We had examples of every type of Airigh from possible beehive (footing only), through Curvilinear, Rectilinear to Rectangular and even a Taigh Earaidh – see figures 1-7 below. The greatest concentration were on the Gress river but the tributary Allt a Deas Muirneag also had some.

Again, these were challenging to photograph – I have ended up with many extremely similar looking photos of reed with the occasional stone poking out. For this reason local drone pilot Chris Murray and I returned in late August to attempt to survey them from above. Unfortunately however we found that even from above the Shielings were difficult to make out and we could not be sure of picking up every single example unless we also had feet on the ground.

It is suggested that what we need is either people walking at the same time as the drone is flying or people walking with a camera on a long pole to get a plan shot of every structure. Eventually it would be great to try to then match these up with the Commun's transcript of an oral tradition describing each Airigh and who used it. Perhaps this could be done next summer.

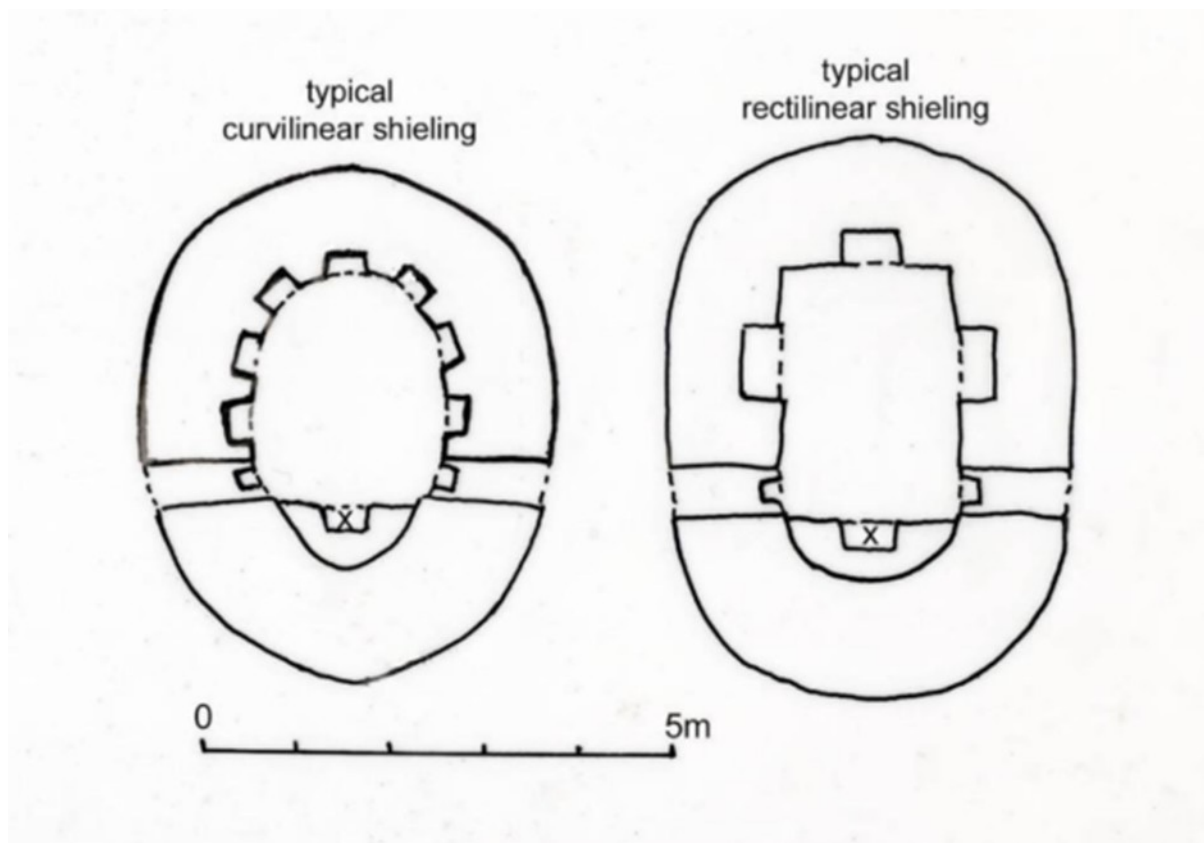


Figure 1: Anne Campbell's typological progression of Shielling, from curvilinear to rectilinear. These were preceded by the circular beehive or "both" type shieling and developed into the perfectly rectangular modern examples afterwards - meaning we have 4 main types. There are also rectangular Taigh Earraich - see fig 4 & 5 below.



Figure 2: One of the latest type of Shieling (truly rectangular) close to the end of the peat road, at NB 46092 44468



Figure 3: An example of a “Curvilinear” shieling on the Gress river



Figure 4: A “Taigh Earraich”, or Spring house. These small houses are part way between a Blackhouse and a Shieling. They came into use fairly recently as an adaptation to years in which there was poor grazing in the villages and people brought their livestock out to the moor earlier than usual. NB 45926 44946.



Figure 5: The same Taigh Earraich from above – Drone shot courtesy of Chris Murray



Figure 6: A possible “Both” or very early shieling. Its low wall footings were circular and very overgrown.



Figure 7: what seemed to be a rectilinear shieling but constructed of turf with no stone, at NB 45595 47067



Figure 8: Starting the climb up Muirneag from Allt a'Deas Muirneag, Ben Barvas and Ben Bragar in the far distance.

Conditions underfoot became steadily more difficult, particularly once we left the Gress river bank. At the foot of Muirneag it got even harder, requiring us to wade through knee or even thigh deep moss and heather.

However the views were most definitely worth it! It felt like being in the middle of an Ocean of Moor, and a very peaceful feeling resulted.



Figure 9: Tom Fionnlaigh – a small cairn on the south peak of Muirneag

Finlay Munro was an itinerant evangelist who visited Lewis in the 1820s. According to Rev Macaulay's *Aspects of the Religious History of Lewis* he gave a farewell sermon from the spot known today as Tom Fhionnlaigh, on the south peak of Muirneag – see Figure 9 above. His text was Isaiah 25:6-9, which begins

Agus anns a' bheinn seo nì an Tighearna do na h uile chinnich cuirm de nithean blasda, cuirm de fhion aosda, de nithean blasda làn de smior, de fhion aosda air a dheagh tharraing.

(And in this mountain shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined.)

A huge crowd of people from all points of the island attended this most spectacular of cathedrals. The singing, it's said, was heard as far off as Glen Tolsta.

Also of interest were the Airigh which were located actually upon the slopes of Muirneag, of which there were three: Gearraidh a Deas, Gearraidh Mor and Bot na Gille – see figure 10 & 11 below. We visited the last two of these, which were Airigh of the third type, with two squared internal corners - or rather, to be more precise, they may have originally been of an older form but had ceased to be rebuilt at type 3.

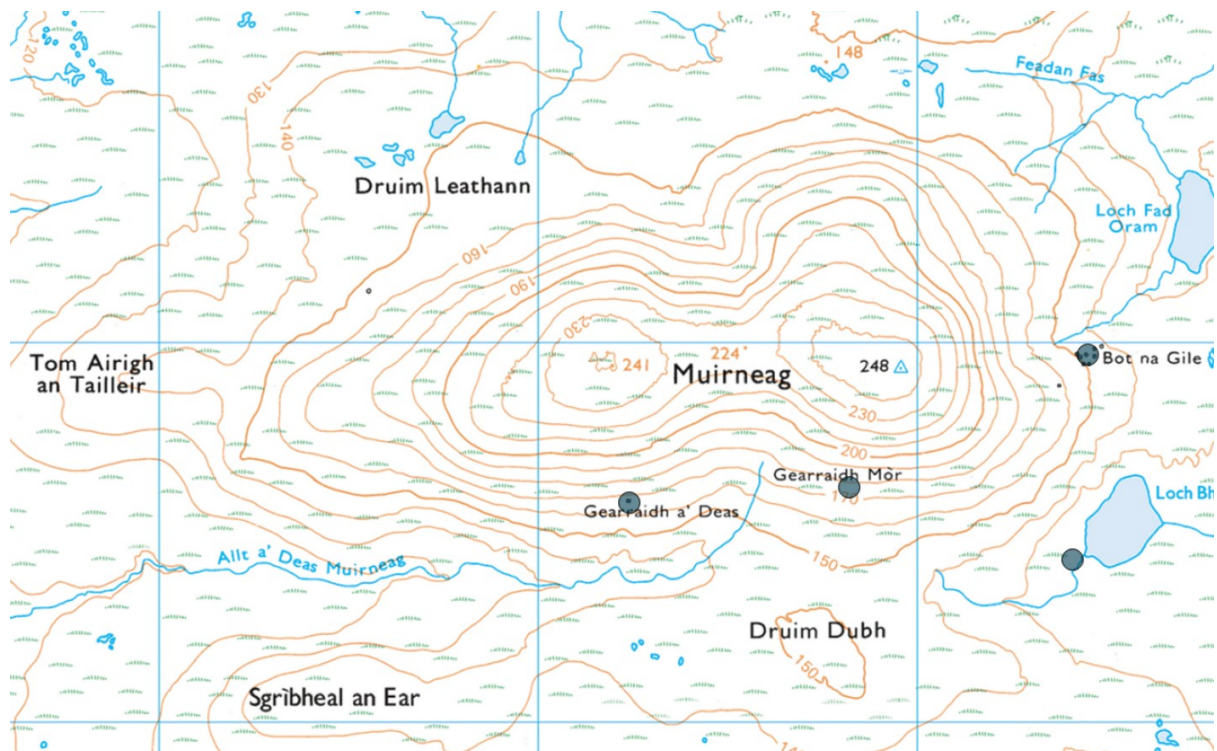


Figure 10: Airigh on the slopes of Muirneag



Figure 11: The best preserved example of Airigh at Bot na Gille, NB 48485 48988.

Are these Airigh on the slopes of Muirneag for a different purpose? They would seem to be in a very different type of location, without as easy access to water but with incredible views over the entire Gress moor. There are none on the western side of the hill. Could they have been built here partly as look outs?

A final point of interest – and mystery – was an almost perfectly circular shape at the eastern foot of Muirneag, spotted on the aerial imagery – see Figure 11, below.



Figure 12: Circular shape in the moor at the eastern foot of Muirneag.

When I first saw this I was convinced it must have been a prehistoric house – often known as a “hut circle”. However when we finally got to it, it appeared to be an entirely natural hole in the ground, around 2m deep and 10m diameter. My only suggestion would be that it appears to be on the junction of two different types of rock (see <https://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain/home.html>) and may therefore be some kind of sinkhole?

As with all the walks, questions have been answered but we seem to have created just as many interesting questions to follow up..