Deer Hunting and Elricks on the Faraid Head, Durness, NW Scotland

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1. Abstract

Elricks, from the Gaelic eilrig, meaning a funnel-shaped defile or enclosure into which deer were driven and killed, represent one of the most significant and archaeologically traceable forms of communal deer hunting practised across the Scottish Highlands from at least the early medieval period through to the eighteenth century. The communal deer drive, the tainchell or tinchel, was central to Gaelic social organisation, reinforcing clan solidarity and the authority of chiefs, and was a primary means of harvesting red deer as food, clothing, and other materials. Elrick structures typically consisted of convergent stone walls forming a funnel that directed driven deer into a circular corral or natural defile, where they were killed with bows, arrows, and spears, or were driven off cliffs to be killed on the shore below. Well-preserved examples survive on the island of Rùm, and traces of elrick-related stone dykes were visible in the nineteenth century on Ben Griam in Sutherland and in the Forest of Dunrobin, placing Faraid Head and Durness within the documented geographic range of the practice in northwest Sutherland. The Durness area, and Balnakeil House in particular, one of the seats of Clan Mackay territory, would have supported organised tainchell hunts. Here we provide new evidence of deer hunting on the Faraid Head, a confined peninsula with natural funnel-shaped narrows and cliff-edge topography, entirely consistent with elrick use. The practice declined in Scotland from the eighteenth century onwards with the introduction of firearms and the reorganisation of Highland land use, though it experienced a brief revival under Prince Albert at Balmoral in the Victorian era.

2. Introduction

The hunting of red deer (Cervus elaphus) has been central to Highland Scottish culture and economy since prehistoric times. Before the introduction of firearms in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the primary method of taking large numbers of deer was the communal drive hunt, the tainchell or tinchel, in which entire communities fanned out across the hills to drive deer towards a carefully prepared killing ground. This killing ground was called, in Gaelic, the eilrig (plural eilrigean), a word conventionally rendered in English as ‘elrick’, and the remarkable frequency of this place-name across the Scottish landscape is silent testimony to the extent and antiquity of the practice.

Here we examine the etymology and morphology of elricks, the social and ecological context of the tainchell hunt, the evidence for elrick use in Sutherland with specific reference to the Faraid Head (An Fharaid) and the Durness area, and the wider Highland and island record. It draws on published archaeological and historical scholarship, place-name evidence, Gaelic literary and documentary sources, and the fragmentary field evidence to provide an integrated account of deer trap use in northwest Scotland.

3. Linguistic History of Elrick

The word eilrig has a complex and fascinating linguistic history. The earliest attested form of the word is erelc, with the meaning of 'ambush'. Through a process of metathesis, the transposition of consonants, erelc became elerc, the form in which it appears in the twelfth-century *Book of Deer* (Leabhar Dheir), the celebrated Gaelic gospel manuscript from Aberdeenshire. The word then evolved through eileirg, eleirig, and eilrig in later medieval and modern Scottish Gaelic. The personal name and place-name 'Elrick' is directly linked to such deer traps. As Jackson (1972) showed in his study of the Gaelic notes in the *Book of Deer*, the word's presence in that twelfth-century manuscript places the Elrick place-name tradition firmly within the medieval Gaelic-speaking zone of northeast Scotland.

The evolution from 'ambush' to 'deer trap' reflects the underlying ecology of the hunt: an eilrig was literally a place of ambush, where concealed hunters waited behind stone walls while beaters drove deer towards them. MacQueen (2008) noted that the Gaelic word 'eilid', meaning a hind, may also have influenced the later form of the word, reinforcing its association with deer. The Scots language equivalent terms include 'hay' (from Old English 'haga', meaning a palisade or enclosure), 'wynd' (a winding narrow passage), and 'fold', all of which describe functionally similar or related deer management structures (e.g. Taylor, 2009).

The Gaelic term does not appear to have passed into Scots as a loan word, implying that the Elrick and Eldrick place-names found across Galloway, Aberdeenshire, and elsewhere retain a direct connection to their Gaelic originals rather than representing an anglicisation. The remarkable geographic breadth of these place-names, from Galloway in the southwest to Aberdeenshire in the northeast and Sutherland in the north, confirms the pan-Scottish extent of elrick deer hunting as a cultural practice.

4. The Morphology of Elrick Structures

4.1 Physical Form

An elrick is defined as a funnel-like defile, artificial or natural, into which deer were herded so that they could be contained and then killed. In its most developed form, an elrick consisted of two stone walls diverging outward from a circular enclosure, the Tigh na Sealg or 'Hunting House', to create a wide funnel that could be up to several kilometres in extent, narrowing to a small entrance into the enclosure. The walls might be of dry-stone construction or, in some cases, of stakes and brushwood (Thornber, 2020). The Tigh na Sealg itself was circular, with walls high enough to contain deer, and incorporated concealed hides or cells within which hunters could conceal themselves with bows and arrows.

The best-preserved elrick in Scotland is the Orval deer trap on the island of Rùm. At Orval, two stone dikes started high up in the volcanic hills and drew nearer to each other until they were only a few feet apart, forming a huge stone funnel opening into a large circular stone enclosure, the Tigh na Sealg. It was high enough to contain the deer and had built within it a number of small cells to hide in ambush. The funnel at Orval exploited the natural topography of a volcanic crater, channelling deer from the open hillsides down through the progressively narrowing walls into the enclosure at the crater floor.

Stone-lined pits and boulders heated in fires have been found in association with elrick sites, believed to have been used to cook or process venison from the newly slaughtered animals (Fletcher, 2011). This association with burnt mound features, horseshoe-shaped mounds of fire-cracked stones and traditionally related to the cooking of venison, is documented in southwest Scotland and potentially identifies an associated processing area wherever elricks are found (Murray, 2006).

4.2 Landscape Siting

Elricks were sited with meticulous understanding of deer behaviour and topography. Watson and Dixon (2024) note in their *History of Scotland's Landscapes* that deer hunting left physical traces on the landscape in the form of banks and dykes used either as park boundaries or for trapping the deer. Effective siting required a wide collecting area from which deer could be gathered and driven, a progressively narrowing topographic corridor that could be enhanced by walls, and a terminus, the Tigh na Sealg or equivalent enclosure, from which escape was impossible. Natural features such as mountain passes, valley heads, cliff edges, and sea inlets were incorporated wherever possible to reduce the construction effort required (Fletcher, 2011). A wide entrance that narrowed down on a gently rising slope would slow the progress of driven deer and places where people could hide, possibly with hounds until required, were advantageous.

William Scrope (1772-1852), in *Days of Deer Stalking in the Scottish Highlands*, described two methods of deer-hunting in Sutherland: ……one was the erection of an enclosure, called Garruna-bhiu (the deer-dikes): it was constructed of two opposite rough stone walls, about a quarter of a mile in length, and 100 yards apart at one end, this distance being gradually contracted to a narrow opening at the other. The deer having been driven in at the wide end in numbers, could not get into the moor at the narrow extremity and thus became easy prey for the sportsmen. The other method was formerly practised at two extreme points of the Sutherland forests. A strong force of men collected them in herds near the sea-coast, urged them forwards, and forced them down the cliffs and crags, and drove them into the water. Boats were concealed amid the rocks, which were put in motion at the proper time, and the deer were attacked.

It is clear that walls were used for enclosing game as well as driving deer into a designated area. Another method, used at Am Parbh in Mackay country, and in Loth, Sutherland, was to drive the deer into the sea:

...ther is an excellent and delectable place for hunting, called the Parwe, wher they hunt the rcid deir in abundance; and somtymcs they dryve them into the ocean sea at the Pharo-hcad, wher they doc tak them in boats as they list. Ther is another pairt in Southerland[...]wher ther arc reid deir; a pleasant place for hunting with grew hounds. Heir also somtymes they dryve the dcir into the south sea, and so doe kill them (Gordon, 1630).

Here we must bear in mind that Am Parbh, Scottish Gaelic for Cape Wrath, was often confused with Faraid Head near Durness (see Figure 1), a mistake only corrected in later 18th century surveys. Driving deer off more than 200 m cliffs at Cape Wrath into rough seas below would not have been feasible as a hunting practice. Phar-head obviously refers to Faraid Head.

5. The Tainchell; Social and Cultural Context

5.1 The Communal Drive Hunt

The tainchell (Gaelic: tainchell, also tinchel or tinchell in English) was the organised deer drive that preceded and enabled the elrick kill. The word is Gaelic for 'a circle', describing the ring of beaters, sometimes hundreds of men, who spread out across a wide area of hills and moors to gather and drive the deer towards the prepared elrick or killing ground (Thornber, 2020). As Crawford (2016) observed in his study of Gaelic hunting culture, the scale of these great hunts in the Highlands, borne out by the literary evidence from the medieval period onwards, reflects a complex matrix of power, patronage, politics and ultimately propaganda.

A Highland deer drive of this type was a major social event that could last several days. A detailed account of the tainchell process comes from Achnacarry in 1654, when Sir Ewen Cameron of Lochiel organised a deer drive to entertain English officers of Cromwell's army. According to a clan historian quoted by Thornber (2020), Lochiel carried his guests to the head of a loch, 'where he was met by some hundred of his men, whom he ordered to be convened for that purpose. These people, stretching themselves in a line along the hills, soon enclosed great numbers of deer, which, having driven to a place appointed, they guarded them so closely' before the kill was made. This account demonstrates the military-like organisation required for an effective tainchell, involving the mobilisation of the clan's able-bodied men in a manner directly analogous to a military muster.

5.2 Deer Hunting as Political and Social Practice

The connection between the deer stalking and warfare is clear. Along with many other Scots monarchs, King James IV (1473-1513) was very keen on the chase, and made several hunting and hawking expeditions to the western and central Highlands. A contemporary portrait, by Daniel Mytens the Elder, shows the king holding a peregrine falcon on his left hand with a bow perch on his right. Thus, the Highlands, for a long period, have been associated with and used as hunting grounds for royalty, as well as for their own native Gaelic aristocracy (see Wiseman, 2007). Similarly, Sir Robert Gordon (1580-1661), writing of Sutherland Highlanders, describes that:

'The bodies and mynds of the people of this province ar inbued with extraordinarie abilities of nature; they are great hunters, and doe delyte in that exercise, which maks them hardened to endure travell and labor'.

Various independent remarks made by several historians combine to form a consensus of opinion that hunting was an integral part of Highland life and culture throughout the late medieval period and beyond. However, less is known about the hunting practices in prehistoric times. Crawford (2016), examining Gaelic hunting culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, argued that the tinchel was a seasonal mobilising of the sluagh, or host, who followed the fine, the Gaelic nobility. This enhanced their status while reinforcing clan solidarity in a shared symbol of sporting endeavour, by chasing the noble quarry of the deer. Hunting inspired some of the greatest songs and stories of Gaelic literature, for example those of Rob Donn Mackay, the great Gaelic Bard, and hunting themes are prevalent in bardic poetry, and the iconography of late medieval West Highland sculpture, from the earliest Old Irish sources down to the literature of Modern Scottish Gaelic.

The identity of the Highland chief was bound up with the image of the hunter-warrior, and the organisation and hosting of a great tainchell was a statement of power and patronage. Gilbert (1979), describes how the word ‘forest’ in medieval Scotland meant not a wooded area but a hunting reserve, a meaning that survives in the ‘deer forests’ of Scotland to this day, and how the king and his magnates exercised rights over these reserves that were fundamental to the feudal order. In the Highlands, where feudal forest law was overlaid on or in tension with the older Gaelic tainchell tradition, the organisation of deer hunting served both as a marker of lordly prestige and as a practical means of provisioning large households with venison.

Durness lay (and lies) within Dùthaich MhicAoidh, the Mackay country, the territorial heartland of Clan Mackay, one of the most powerful clans of the far north. The chiefs of Clan Mackay, as lords of the dùthaich, would have been responsible for organising the tainchell hunts on their territory, both as a practical means of provisioning their households and as a demonstration of their authority over the land and its people. The mobilisation of clansmen as beaters in the tainchell, as Crawford (2016) emphasised, was functionally analogous to the mobilisation of the sluagh or host for warfare, and served the same purpose of affirming and reinforcing the chief’s leadership role. Clan Mackay’s territory includes the extensive moorlands south and east of Durness suitable for gathering and driving deer, the river valleys of the Dionard and Strath Dionard that would naturally channel deer movement northward towards the coast, and the narrows of the Faraid Head peninsula where the drive could be terminated.

5.3 The Decline of Elrick Hunting

The introduction of effective firearms fundamentally changed the economics of deer hunting. Individual stalking of red deer with a rifle, the practice that developed into the modern Highland ‘deer stalking’ tradition, was far less labour-intensive than organising a tainchell involving hundreds of beaters, and became the dominant mode of deer hunting on Highland estates from the later eighteenth century onwards.

The Highland Clearances of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which dramatically depopulated the Highland straths and glens, also removed the pool of clan dependants who had served as tainchell beaters. Without a large resident population of clansmen available for mobilisation, the communal deer drive became impractical. The clearances of the Durness area directly depleted the human infrastructure on which tainchell hunting depended.

The practice had a brief resurgence in the days of Prince Albert, who hosted deer drives at Balmoral in the mid-nineteenth century that partially revived the tainchell tradition. This Victorian revival was, however, socially, and ecologically different from the medieval original: it involved hired beaters rather than clan dependants, and was undertaken as an aristocratic sporting entertainment rather than as a communal subsistence activity. Modern deer stalking in the Highlands, as offered by estates across Sutherland, Caithness, and the northwest, including the deer forests of Sutherland adjacent to the Durness area, is the direct descendant of this Victorian tradition of individual rifle stalking rather than of the communal elrick hunt.

6. Faraid Head and Durness

The broader Durness area is known to have been inhabited and used for hunting from prehistoric times. Sutherland was home to red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) throughout this period, and the region's clan history, centred on the Mackay lands, of which Balnakeil was a seat, would have sustained the kind of aristocratic hunting culture that made use of tinchels and elricks well into the early modern period. There is absence of specifically documented elrick deer hunting at the Faraid Head in the historical or archaeological literature. However, that does not constitute evidence against such use, rather, it reflects the general poverty of archaeological investigation on the peninsula, where systematic survey of earthworks and stone structures in the context of deer hunting has never been undertaken.

Faraid Head (An Fharaid) forms a rocky peninsula approximately 3.6 km long and up to 1 km wide projecting north-north-westward into the North Atlantic (Figures 1 and 2). Its topography consists of Moine Supergroup psammites and mylonites, rising to a dissected plateau at approximately 60–70 m OD, with steep to precipitous cliffs on the northern and eastern margins and a gentler slope descending to the Balnakeil dune system and beaches to the west (Figure 2). The neck of the peninsula, connecting it to the mainland east of Balnakeil, is less than 600 m wide and about 300 m at Flirum (Figure 3), and is traversable by two routes: along the beach/dune margin on the western side, and across rocky beaches on the eastern side below high cliffs.

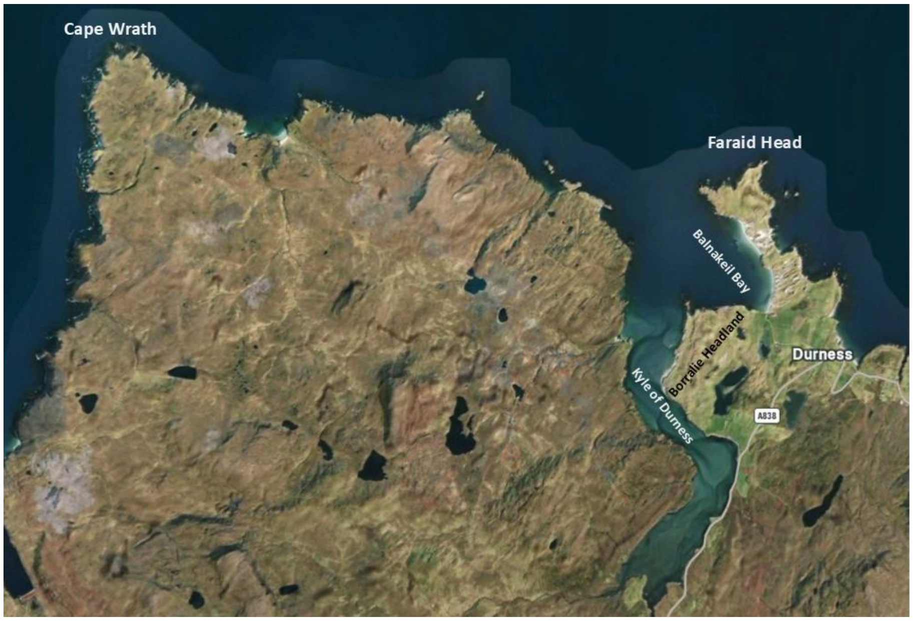

Figure 1. Map showing the location of Faraid Head and Cape Wrath.

This topography is highly significant in the context of elrick deer hunting. The narrowness of the Faraid Head neck creates precisely the kind of natural funnel or defile that was most efficiently exploited by elrick practitioners, with the narrowing neck acting as a natural converging funnel as a herd of deer driven northward toward the headland would have found themselves hemmed in by cliff and sea.

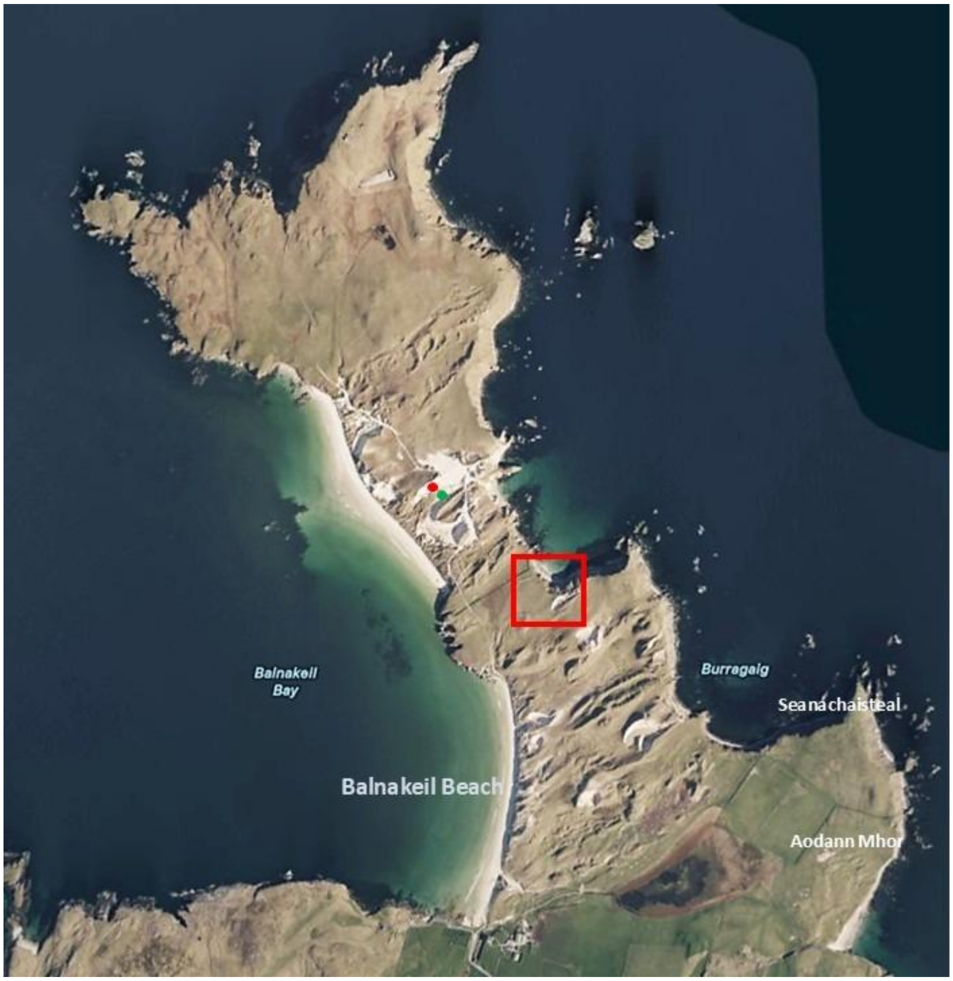

Figure 2. Faraid Head. Red square shows the location of a potential elrick on the peninsula (see Figure 3). Red and green dots show the location of a burnt mound and a hearth respectively. The width of the peninsula at location is 300 m.

Walls located across the neck, of which traces survive (Figure 3), have not been surveyed in an elrick context. Proper walling would have prevented escape routes for the deer while allowing beaters to drive the herd eastwards and off the cliffs at Flirum (30-40 m high), making the Faraid Head peninsula an ideal natural elrick. People would have gathered and waited on the shore as the deer was driven and toppled over the sea cliff face to be slaughtered on the beach below (Figures 3 and 4).

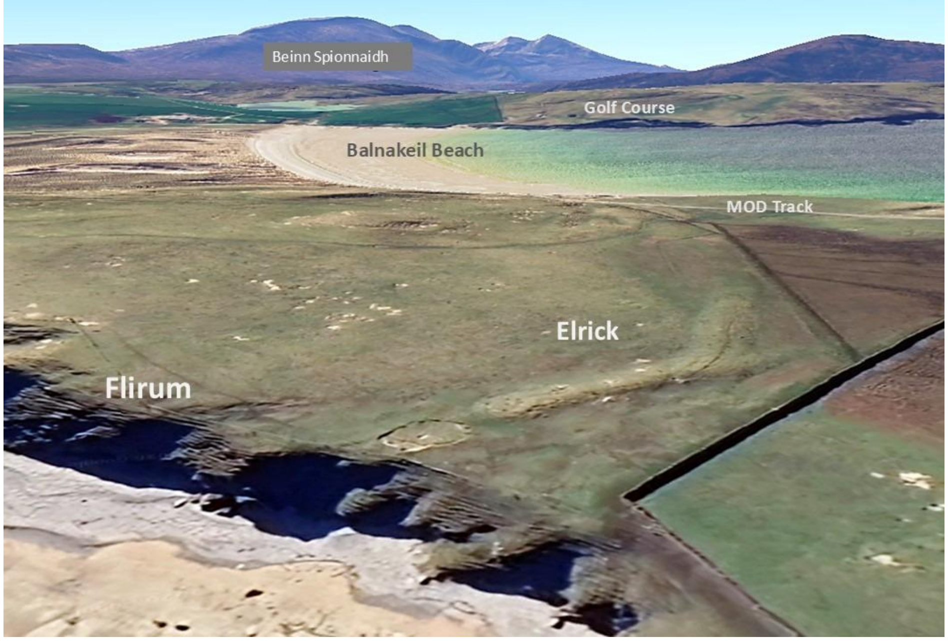

Figure 3. View to the west from Flirum on the Faraid Head (GoogleEarth).

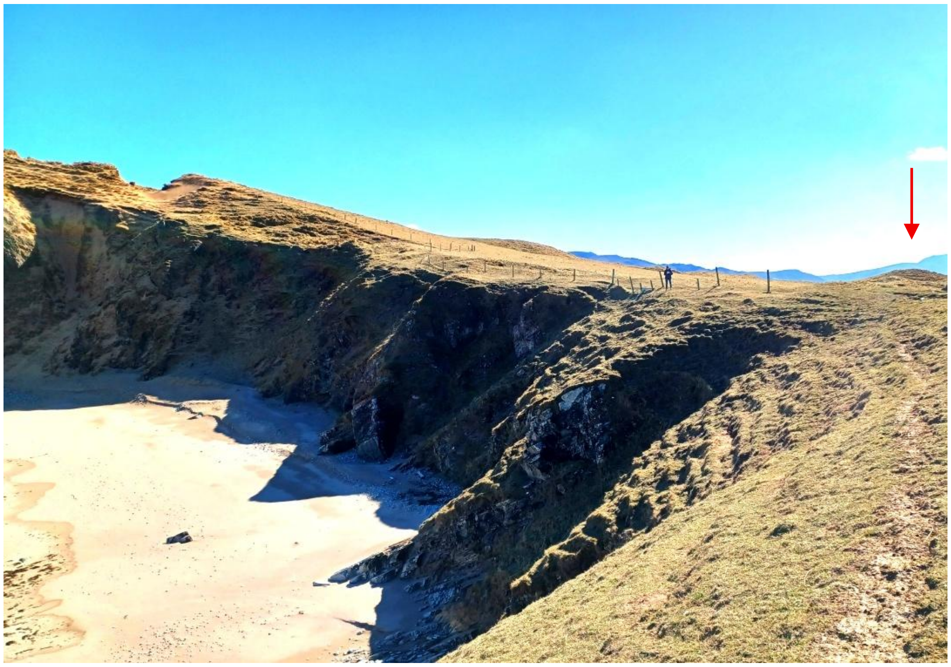

Figure 4. Flirum looking south. Arrow points to traces of the elrick (see Figure 3).

Relics of a burnt mound, possibly prehistoric (NRHE ID: 349517), is found about 450 m to the NW of Flirum and nearby, a concentration of intensely burnt rocks (hearth), mostly quartzite (Figure 2). They are partly buried in sand but we have sampled some deer teeth and a few deer bones. Due to the dynamic nature of the dune system any evidence of processing the deer is obscure. Stone lined pits and boulders once heated in fires, have been found in the Highlands associated with elricks which may have been used to cook or render the venison from the newly slaughtered animals. Burnt mounds consist of a pit and heaps of shattered stones that have once been profoundly heated. These structures are traditionally associated with the cooking of venison in the water filled pit, using the heated stones to boil the water (Fletcher, 2011).

7. Discussion and Conclusions

Located approximately three kilometres north of the village of Durness, the Faraid Head and its immediate environs preserve an extraordinary compressed record of human activity spanning at least from the Bronze Age through the Iron Age, the Medieval/Norse era, the medieval Christian period, and into the modern age of military occupation.

The Balnakeil sand-dunes, driven by prevailing Atlantic winds, have been mobile throughout the Holocene (the last 12000 yrs), alternately burying and exposing cultural deposits. This dynamic nature creates a double-edged archaeological setting: on one hand, burial by wind-blown sand has preserved organic materials and some stratigraphic contexts that would otherwise have been destroyed; on the other, erosion of dune faces and blow-throughs can rapidly expose fragile skeletal material and artefacts to the elements and completely erase any chronological context in the field.

We have sampled a Bronze Age spear mould in the area accompanied by a shale crucible and bronze prills (slags). This, in addition to vague roundhouse structures, indicates Bronze Age settlement on the peninsula. The most significant Iron Age monument is the promontory broch of Seanachaisteal (Figure 2), a Scheduled Ancient Monument located at the point of Aodann Mhor (SM5303). The single most significant archaeological discovery associated with the Faraid Head area is unquestionably a Viking burial excavated from the sand dunes at the northern end of Balnakeil Bay in 1991. The burial is dated to broadly the mid-ninth century AD, most probably between approximately AD 850 and 900. This find strongly suggests a Norse settlement in the vicinity of the burial (Batey and Paterson, 2013) further supported by Engl and Hudson (2021) who concluded that an archaeological site discovered about 200 m SE of the Viking burial represents evidence of a Norse domestic dwelling.

In the Blaeu Atlas of Scotland (1654) Durness is portrayed as a barony with ‘level and pleasant soil’ where it faces the north-west. It describes Durness as being at the very edge of the known world, noting that for those sailing directly north from there, ‘no land can be found’. He expressed deer hunting as a grand, communal event of great cultural and political significance in the Scottish Highlands. In the text accompanying his maps, which was largely based on the fieldwork of Timothy Pont from the 1580s and 1590s, Blaeu does not explicitly describe deer hunting in Durness or on Faraid Head, though his atlas and the underlying manuscripts by Timothy Pont contain related topographical and natural history remarks for those specific areas.

In May, 1263, King Hakon lV of Norway sent eight longships from Orkney preceding a hostile encounter with King Alexander lll of Scotland, which climaxed with the Battle of Largs in October the same year. These ships berthed at the Faraid Head en route. The Faraid was referred to as Dýrnes, or the Ness of Deer, in the Icelandic Sagas. A detailed description of the landing is found in Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar, written by Sturla Þórðarson in 1264-1265:

Síðan sigldu þeir inn undir Skotland undir Dýrrness ok gengu þar upp, ok brutu Gamla kastala, en menn, þeir sem í voru, flýðu undan síðan brendu þeir meirr en tvoaegr bæi ok þá sigldu þeir í Suðreyjar, ok fundu þar Magnús konúng or Mön.

This roughly describes how Hakon´s men arrived at Dýrnes (Durness), they burnt down 20 farms, probably at Aodann Mhor (Figure 3) and demolished the Iron Age broch of Seanachaisteal (Figure 3) before sailing to the Southern Isles and meeting with King Magnus of Mann and the Isles. In the Icelandic Sagas, written in the 13th and 14th centuries, where the Durness area is cited, the Faraid Head is called Dýrnes.

A well-known phrase, often attributed to Carl Sagan, states: ‘The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.’ We believe we have gathered enough evidence to make a case for elrick deer hunting on the Faraid Head near the modern village of Durness. The absence of a specifically documented elrick at Faraid Head in the historical or archaeological literature does not constitute evidence against such use. Rather, it reflects the general lack of archaeological investigation, where systematic survey of earthworks and stone structures in the context of deer hunting has never been undertaken.

A targeted programme of field survey at Faraid Head, including examination of the peninsula neck, for traces of convergent stone walls, survey of the plateau surface for structural remains, and systematic search of the cliff edges for associated features, would represent a significant and potentially rewarding research project. The contextual parallels with Rùm, Jura, and the Strathardle and Cairngorms elrick complexes are compelling, and Faraid Head’s natural topography and historic documentation is arguably more favourable for elrick use than many sites where elrick activity is already established.

Perhaps the strongest evidence for Faraid Head (Scottish Gaelic: An Fharaird) as a focus for the deer hunt lies simply in the name ‘Durness’, ‘Dýrnes’ – the ‘point’ or ‘ness’ of the deer. By referring to early maps of the area, dating back to the Pont maps of Scotland, (ca. 1583-1614) we see that what now is referred to as Balnakeil Bay, was generally known as Loch Durinis (Durenish) or Dureness Bay well into the nineteenth century. It is only in the early-mid eighteen hundreds that the name Balnakill Bay appears and Dureness Bay is gradually phased out.

It seems likely that An Fharaid or An Fharaird (*fair* meaning ‘projecting/overhanging’ and *àird* meaning ‘height/headland’), refers only to the tip of the peninsula, and that the peninsula itself was known as Dureness or Dýrnes. The present location of the village of Durness is relatively modern. It developed into its modern form as a central village primarily in the late 18th and 19th centuries. Historically, the population was scattered across many small townships until social and economic changes, such as the Highland Clearances, consolidated the settlement.

If we accept that what we now refer to as An Fharaid or Faraid Head was once known as Dýrnes, we must then ask why would this sandy, cliffy peninsula be so called? It is not the natural habitat for red deer, who reside in the forests and mountains. The answer must be that this was the place to which the animals were driven to be hunted and slaughtered.

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