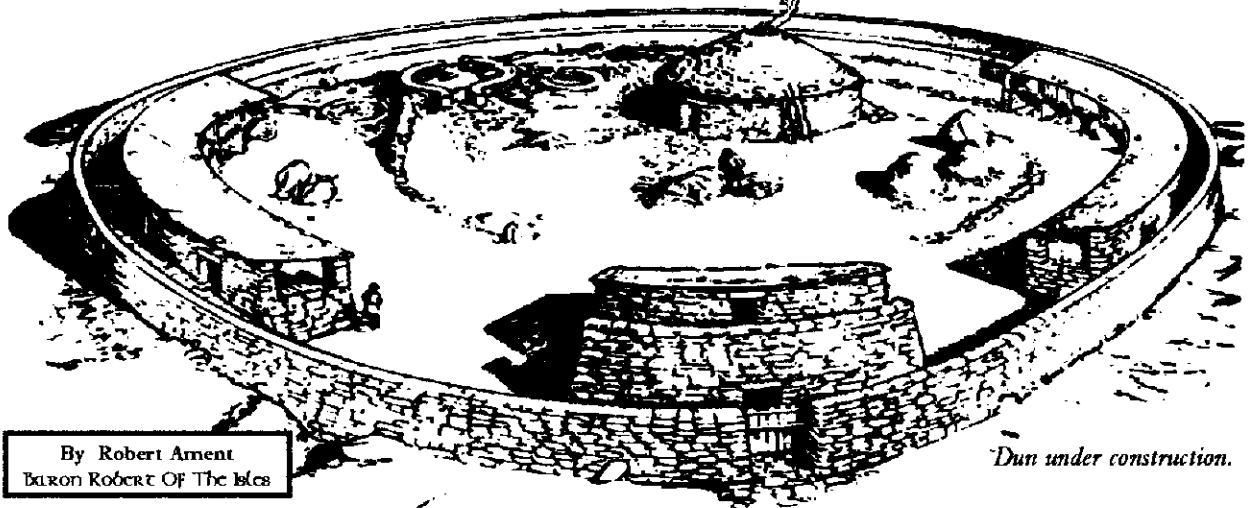


Duns and Brochs

Scotland's Ancient Celtic Castles and Keeps



By Robert Arment
Baron Robert Of The Isles

Dun under construction.

Contrary to popular—at least with the Normans—belief, an extensive number of stone walled keeps and castles did exist in the British Isles prior to the Conquest. These structures were found in a fairly extensive area; Scotland, the Shetland and Orkney Islands. The construction of these early castles started in approximately 200 BC and their construction continued for more than 300 years, by which time the Celts were fully occupied with the Roman threat.

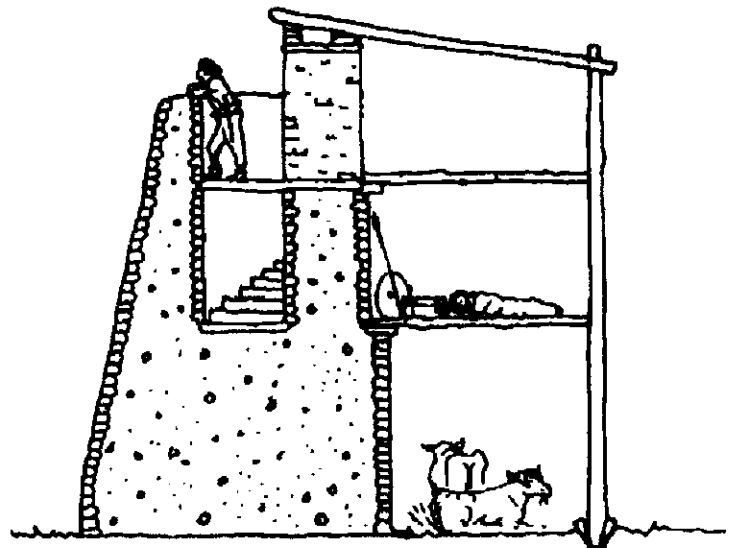
These structures were a logical adaptation of the common hill-forts to an area where timber and people have always been less plentiful than in the southern reaches of the island. Maiden Castle in Dorset encloses some 160 acres which presupposes a sizeable population for construction and defense. Researchers have calculated that, using antler picks, shoulderblade shovels, and wicker baskets, 150 men could fortify an enclosure of about 8 acres with a single bank and ditch in about four months. The research did not indicate whether this also included the erection of the palisade atop the bank.

In Scotland there was more need for a type of structure which could provide a single village or clan or family with a readily defensible strong-point. It is here that the individual castle begins.

In the beginning it may have started as an earth-work of similar style to the southern hill-forts, though smaller in scale, but soon evolved into a form

which was much more compatible with the building sites and available building materials as well as a design more favorable to day-to-day living if not quite as tactically desirable. Duns are found in the west and south-west of Scotland with a relative few scattered through the east and north. Duns are a specialized form of hill-fort adapted to serve the needs of a village or clan or large family.

They are small structures as castles go, usually having an interior diameter of less than 60 feet and have a narrow entry doorways which angle through the dry-stone walls which can be as much as 15 feet thick at their base. Duns had fairly complex



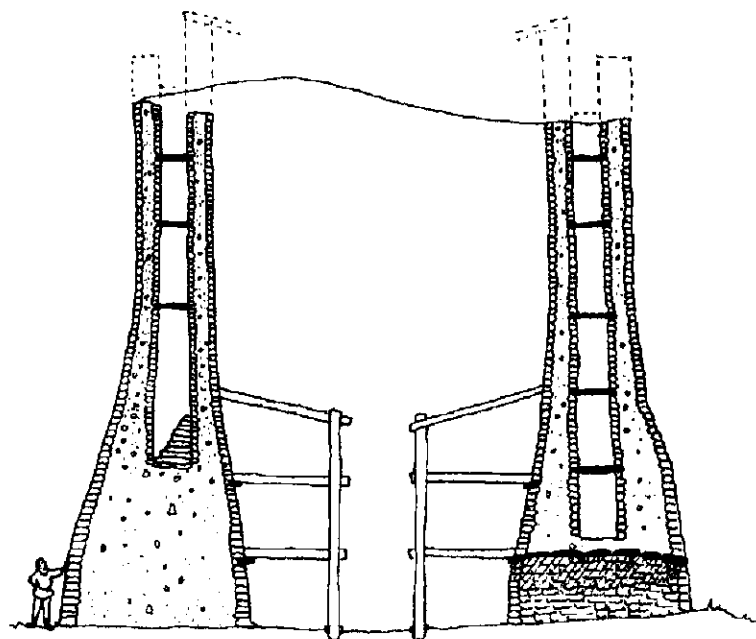
Cross-section of a typical galleried dun.

accommodations, usually with two-story buildings built against the inside walls and at least a hollow gallery in the thickness of the walls themselves, while the larger or more important duns often had two-story galleries and three-story buildings. The Irish legends of Cuchulainn and the heroes of the Red Branch give a good picture of life in these early castles.

If duns are the ancient castles, the brochs are the counterpart of the tower or keep. The tendency to build up rather than out probably reflects the need for a defensive fortification which could be defended by a relatively small number of warriors. Brochs, which are found only in the north of Scotland and the Shetland and Orkney Islands are easily the most impressive of these stone defenses and were usually built on commanding headlands or rocky stacks rising out of the sea. These fortifications appear to have served as family or farmstead strongholds rather than commercial or military centers as many duns appear to have been.

A broch is best described as a hollow tower with sloping sides. The internal courtyards of these towers had roughly the same diameter as the height of the walls which in some cases rose more than 50 feet. The walls were thicker at the base than at the top with the outer walls sloping more than the inner. While the walls were generally solid at the base, they divided into inner and outer walls to accommodate rooms, staircases and galleries. The walls would have been almost impossible to climb and were too thick to easily batter down, while the narrow entry door was easily defended and the walls of the tower were tall enough to make it nearly impossible to toss burning materials onto the interior buildings which were built against the walls as in the duns. With the livestock safely tucked away in the usual ground-floor accommodations the dun or broch's occupants were well protected against all but the most overwhelming of surprise attacks or a prolonged siege by a very determined enemy.

Given the proven ingenuity of our Celtic ancestors, it does not require too much of a stretch of the imagination to visualize what could have been the ultimate flowering of the Celtic castle—the combining of dun and broch in one fortification, giving rise to the great-great-grandfather of the drum castle with its circular walls and strong central keep. Unfortunately, no evidence of this type of Celtic fortification has yet been found. Perhaps one will yet be found... perhaps the 'Roman Problem' prevented



Cross-section of a broch, showing rooms and galleries within the walls and wooden lean-tos in the central courtyard.

the final evolution of the Celtic castle... perhaps our Celtic ancestors felt that a structure of this type would be too wasteful of land and resources. Whatever the truth, we can but imagine what the final form might have been.

I hope that this will have helped to shed a little light on the subject of these magnificent structures which dominated and shaped life in Scotland for several hundred years. Maybe it will prompt some of you to conduct further research into the history and construction of these castles.

Who knows, it might even inspire some group with access to one of the newly appearing 'permanent sites' to actually plan and conduct their own experiment in Historical Architecture by planing and constructing an authentic Celtic dun. Heaven knows stranger things have been done!

If any you do decide to undertake a project like this, please reserve an antler pick, shoulderblade shovel and carrying basket for me...

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