



During the Iron Age, communities in Britain lived in large roundhouses, some of which could hold substantial numbers of people. Across most of the country these buildings were built of timber or had low walls of earth and stone. In most cases, two millennia of ploughing have removed all surface traces of these buildings and they can only be found through excavation to reveal their post-holes, wall-footings and buried floors. In the north and west of Scotland, however, timber was scarce and roundhouses were built using stone. These Atlantic roundhouses were often massive constructions, with walls several metres thick to insulate them against the wind and weather. The sheer mass of these buildings, along with the relative lack of intensive agriculture in later centuries, has ensured that their remains survive remarkably well, especially in Orkney, Shetland, the Western Isles, Caithness and parts of the west mainland.

After their first appearance around 700 BC, Atlantic roundhouses began to evolve into ever more complex constructions, with galleries and cells built into their walls. Around 400 BC, we see the appearance of the first broch towers. These remarkable buildings pushed roundhouse architecture to its limits. Using drystone construction (i.e. without any mortar), they featured two concentric walls with an intervening space, or gallery, running between them. The two walls were joined together at vertical intervals by large stone lintels, which formed a series of superimposed galleries linked, by stairs within the walls. This distinctive building method produced remarkably stable constructions which, at sites like Mousa in Shetland, could stand to a height of more than 13 m, and would have made powerful statements of territorial control within the open landscapes of Atlantic Scotland.

Other architectural elaborations tell us something about the vanished timber components of these buildings. Ledges, called scarcements, projecting from the inner wall, would have supported upper timber floors and rafters for the roof. Vertical rows of small openings, known as wall-voids, were probably

intended to allow air from the internal hearths to circulate, to keep the intra-mural space dry. Although this space was accessible via stairs and galleries in the lower part of the building, as the galleries rose they became too narrow for even the smallest child to squeeze through. Only at Mousa was there access all the way to the wall-head, and it is likely that this is due to reconstruction in the Viking period that turned the old roundhouse into a makeshift fort. Although the roofs of these buildings have long since disappeared, they were most probably of conical thatched construction, like contemporary timber roundhouses in other parts of Britain.

The use of timber in the floors and roofs raises questions concerning the timber supply, since the islands in particular were as treeless in the Iron Age as they are now. Some would have been derived from driftwood, but there may also have been a trade in structural timbers between island communities and those of the northern mainland, where trees would have been much more plentiful. There was certainly close communication between these regions, since the highly-specialised architectural design of the broch tower spread remarkably quickly over the whole area. The complexity of the architecture suggests that they were built by specialists who would most likely have been supported by local labour to quarry, transport and lift the stones.

Life inside the broch towers would have been dark and cramped by modern standards. It seems likely that the ground floors were given over to animals and storage, since the inner walls at ground level are sometimes less well constructed than those above, and lumps of unlevelled bedrock often project from the floor. Heat rising from animals would have provided warmth to the human inhabitants above. In this sense, broch towers share much in common with traditional Highland byre-houses, where animals occupied one half of the building and humans the other.

The occupants of the first broch towers were probably relatively egalitarian communities, since there is no evidence in the region for signs of

rank or personal status and no elaborate burials. The structures are far too common to have been the houses of chiefs or kings, and broch towers within any given region are more or less similar in size and visual impact. They are likely to have been inhabited by extended family groups who farmed the surrounding lands. These communities seem to have used the visual power of architecture to proclaim their tenure over the limited parcels of agricultural land that dot the Highlands and Islands, and there was undoubtedly an element of competition between neighbours.

Broch towers in their most developed form were probably built for no more than a few generations, although the construction of smaller, less ambitious Atlantic roundhouses carried on for many centuries. In Orkney and Caithness, during the first century BC, small villages grew up around some of the more important broch towers. At Gurness, for example, the old broch tower, now probably much reduced in height, became the focal point

within a tightly clustered collection of small stone houses. In such cases it seems that the old roundhouses had been claimed by an emerging social elite. Indeed, the sheer size and physical presence of the broch towers ensured that they were reoccupied, modified and maintained for up to a thousand years.

Further Reading

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Romankiewicz, T. 2012. *The Complex Roundhouses of the Scottish Iron Age*. Oxford: Archaeopress



1: - Ground Plan of the Broch of Mousa, Shetland. 2: - Ground plan of Dun Bharabhat, Lewis
 3: - Reconstruction drawing of Dun Carloway. Courtesy & copyright Alan Braby. 4: - View of Dun Carloway, Lweis
 Courtesy & copyright Alex Gibson. 5: - Detail of the cavity wall at Dun Carloway. Courtesy & copyright Alex
 Gibson.

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