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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CASTLE SWEEN



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CASTLE SWEEN

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Castle Sween is thought to be the earliest surviving stone castle on the Scottish Mainland. It sits on a low rocky ridge on the east shore of Loch Sween with a commanding prospect over Loch Sween and out to Jura. Immediately west of the castle is an islet cleared to act as a boat landing.

The castle is a quadrangular enclosure, probably of late 12th century date with later additions up until the 17th century, after which time it became ruinous. The main part of the castle is a stone-walled enclosure which originally contained buildings of light construction against the inner face of three of the courtyard walls. The walls contain no windows, but externally have corner and pilaster buttresses, a detail supporting the 12th century date. The main gate is within the base of a pilaster buttress and has a rounded arch. The castle courtyard contains a well.

Added to the W side of the enclosure is a square tower dating to the early 14th century and incorporates the remains of a wing of the 13th century. Attached at its north side, is a small round tower built in the 14th century. At the NE angle of the castle is the rectangular Macmillan Tower, at least two floors of high quality private accommodation over a kitchen basement.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- The castle and adjacent Loch take their name from Suibhne a chieftain of Irish descent and ancestor of the MacSweens. That Suibhne built the castle is confirmed by an Irish chronicle written in the 16th century but thought to draw on earlier documents.
- The marriage of Suibhne's son to a Campbell heiress was recorded in a Campbell history where he was described as 'Dugal MacSwine of Skipnish, whose predecessors were proprietors of Knapdail and Kelislate and built that large house Castle Swine'.
- Dugald and his cousin Murchadh were important landowners in the middle of the 13th century appearing as a witness in a Paisley charter of soon after 1232. By 1261 Dougal MacSween was also lord of the hall-house at Skipness and in the same year granted the income from Kintyre Church to Paisley Abbey
- In a charter of 1262 confirming the grant of Paisley, Walter Stewart, Earl of Mentieth refers to his own acquisition of the lands of Skipness from Dougal, this is the only reference to the MacSweens loss of these properties. However, during the Wars of Independence the MacSweens attempted to regain Knapdale from their stronghold at Fanad in Donegal. Operating on behalf of Edward I of England, John commanded a fleet in the Firth of Clyde and subsequently visited Sween a visit celebrated in a Gaelic poem (in the *Book of the Dean of Lismore*).
- The Castle remained with the Stewarts until 1376 when it was granted to John Lord of the Isles. From 1430 a succession of keepers held the castle on their behalf, including the MacNeils of Gigha and after 1472 the McMillians. In 1478 the Lord's of the Isles were forfeit and within four years

their lands in Knapdale were granted to the Earl of Argyll and successive Campbell's were appointed as keepers thereafter.

- In 1615 the castle served as an assembly point for the earl of Argyll's expedition against Macdonald of Islay, while in 1646 it was used as a centre for the import of meal from Ireland for distribution to Government forces. Royalist attacked it under the command of Colkitto, Montros's lieutenant. And in 1647 Sir Alexander Macdonald finally destroyed it. Thereafter the castle was divided between farming tenants.

Archaeological Overview

Much of the early excavation of the castle was undertaken as clearance work by the Ministry of Works in the 1920s – this resulted in a fine collection of small-finds as listed below, but little detail of the archaeological sequence of developments at Castle Sween. The finds do hint at prehistoric occupation of this site.

- A stone axe and whetstone were found in a cave beneath the castle.
- A Neolithic 6-knobbed stone ball, c50mm was found between the SW wall of the courtyard of the castle and the square west tower.
- Three medieval broaches and implements.
- A barbed-and-tanged arrowhead was found below the gate on the outer-side. (The finds are in the collection of the Royal Museum of Scotland.)

Two small-scale excavations in the 1980s within the E half of the castle courtyard revealed a complex sequence of domestic and service ranges, culminating in an industrial (probably metalworking) complex installed once all of the major buildings were cleared. At least five separate periods of use were identified within the courtyard. The small-finds included a 15th century harp-peg very similar to those found at Finlaggan on Islay, and also associated with the Lord's of the Isles.

The archaeological potential both within the castle and in the surrounding ground is very considerable, the identification of a boat landing adjacent to the castle probably means there were other structures associated with the servicing of the fleet.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

The great quadrangular enclosing wall of rubble was strengthened by flat buttresses at the corners and in centre of the sidewalks. The buttresses display architectural similarities with the earliest period of build at Aberdour Castle in Fife. Built about 1200, it was pierced by a barrel-vaulted gateway on the south side and a sea-gate on the west. In the courtyard the well and foundations of later walls overlie the earlier courtyard structures. The simple enclosure walls of the MacSweens castle protected the internal buildings, their form is not clear from the present evidence but seem likely to have included some form of tower like structure in the north east of the enclosure.

Extensive remodelling began under the Stewarts. In the century after 1262 they built the two towers on the west side of the castle. The rectangular keep or McMillians Tower was added at the north east corner of the castle in the 15th

century, it has a kitchen in the basement with the lord's apartments above. This first floor apartment was provided with access into a hall within the courtyard of the castle built during the 15th century by the MacNeils of Gigha within a substantial east range.

All of the medieval buildings were removed when a kiln, probably for metalworking was constructed in the courtyard.

Social Overview

No formal assessment has been made of the castles local social value, it currently forms the focus of a caravan park and is well used by the residents and day visitors.

Spiritual Overview

None known and no chapel has been identified at Sween, but Kilmory Knap Chapel lies only a few miles south.

Aesthetic Overview

The spectacular coastal location lends Castle Sween a particular picturesque quality. This was recognised in the location of the caravan park around the monument. This however, makes it difficult to get any of the magnificent distant views around the monument, either from land or sea, without modern structures impinging on the view.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

Planning and arrangements of the early castle

Secure dating evidence for the original castle and each of the additional elements – this could only be achieved by excavation.

The extent of the castle town known to have existed around the castle

The extent of the provision for galleys of the fleet and their crews outwith the castle.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Castle Sween is the earliest stone castle on the Scottish Mainland
- The architectural detail of the original courtyard enclosure.
- The importance of the successive owners and their association with affairs of state of the Kingdom of the Isles, Scotland, Ireland and England.
- The survival of a Gaelic poem relating to the MacSweens attempt to regain the Castle during the Wars of Independence.
- The identification of the boat-landing place adjacent to the castle – the vital importance of the sea as a major transport link is difficult to illustrate at most sites.
- The absorption of Knapdale into the estates of the Earl of Argyll.

Associated Properties

Skipness Castle, Lochranza Castle, Fanad in Donegal, also owned by MacSween

Dunstaffnage Castle, Finlaggan plus many West Coast castles from Kismul and Tioram in the north to Isle of Man in the south are associated with the Lordship of the Isles.

Aberdour Castle, architectural similarities

Keywords Enclosure Castle, curtain wall, butress, courtyard castle, MacSween, Lord's of the Isles, Macdonald, McMillan, Campbell,