

## St Brendan's Seat and the Standing Stones of Duachy

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A Seil born lady in her fifties told me, some years ago, the story of St Brendan's Seat. She had been told by her Grandmother. A promise had been made by the Grandmother to show her, one day, the stone carved seat of the bringer of Christianity to Lorn. The promise was never kept.

The simple, but intriguing, story was that somewhere on the hill above Clachan Sound (the narrow stretch of water which separates Kilninver parish from the island of Seil, and which is crossed by the Atlantic Bridge) there is an outcrop of rock into which has been carved a large seat. From this seat St Brendan used to keep watch over the islands and dispense advice to his followers.

Patrick Gillies (1902) tells us that that this hill is called *Suidhe Bhreanain* which means The Seat of St Brendan. He also reminds us that the Aberdeen Breviary recounts that having sailed to the west coast of Scotland St Brendan initially established his base on a hill known thereafter as *Sedes Brandani* and that this hill stretched into the sea where only one ship could enter.

I spent days on that hill searching for the seat carved out of a rock face. I found the rock with cup and ring markings and came across the low and barely discernable remains of a churchyard; Gillies' *Claodh Bhreanian* (the burial ground of St Brendan). But of a stone carved seat there was no sign. I employed local knowledge asking the then shepherd of Clachan Farm and other, long-historied residents of Kilninver and Seil. None had even heard of the seat, let alone seen it. But I was sure that it existed. The clues in the gaelic names and the old story just seemed to make sense. I consulted Gillies (1902) again and it became clear; I had been looking on the right hill but in the wrong place on that hill. In a passage following his first reference to The Seat of St Brendan he describes *Suidhe Bhreanian* as extending as far as *Dubh* (black) Loch on Duachy land thus making the hill a full kilometre wider west to east than appeared from the actual lie of the land and the map contours. St Brendan's Seat lies in a hard to find re-entrant some forty metres above Dubh

Loch and overlooks, not Clachan Sound, but the Duachy standing stones.

### **“St Brendan’s” Seat**

The seat appears to have been carved out of the solid rock and you can see some of the carving lines today particularly on the right hand side as you face the seat. The outcrop is some 3 metres wide, 1.5 metres high and is oval in shape with the seat in the centre. The back rest of the seat is 0.9 metres high and 0.8 metres wide. The seat is 0.5 metres deep and 0.8 metres wide. The overhang for your dangling legs has a drop of 0.5 metres. It is incredibly comfortable to sit in, enhanced by a couple of centimetres of soil and grass which have accumulated on the seat. Usually, sheep droppings need to be brushed aside before sitting down.

The view from the seat is directly onto the standing stones some 400 metres distant and 30 metres below. In viewing the standing stones from the seat the Bronze Age settlement, Dubh Loch and the fertile fields are all clearly in sight. I would conjecture that there is a direct relationship between the seat and the stones. It is very likely that they were constructed at the same time and that the relationship is ceremonial.

The seat is not mentioned in the 1975 RCAHMS survey because it must have been unknown to them. This should not be surprising for it appears to be only known of in local memory. It is very hard to find and in a place where the few ramblers who enjoy the Duachy area would be very unlikely to walk. Moreover, if someone was walking this area of hillside when the bracken is up they would literally have to stumble into the seat to know that it’s there. Those who work this land no longer do so on foot. There are other archaeological remains in the area, which are unknown to RCAHMS, notably the stone built burial chamber on Seil. This chamber is, also, very hard to find but its finely constructed entrance passage way is evidence of its importance. More of that another time.



St Brendan's Seat in January 2008.

**Duachy standing stones.**

*Duachy*, which means Meeting Place, becomes a very important word in the understanding of St Brendan's Seat and its relationship to the standing stones. Present day Duachy Farm, overlooking Loch Seil, stands some four hundred metres north east of the standing stones and is probably a tacksman's house built in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It gets its name from the ruined croft which stands below the standing stones and beside the exit stream of Dubh Loch. Robertson's 1796 Report of Netherlorn describes Duachy croft and farmland as being in a little "Braelet" of a light loam, something which confused Nancy Black (1999), which refers to the stream which drains Dubh Loch and the fertile fields to its west. In these fields there is evidence of a large midden and on the northern edge of the stream there are the remains of stone structures of, presumably by their nature and state, very ancient age.

Once there were (at least) four upright stones, three erected in a NNW to SSE line with the fourth some 38 metres to the NE. Today

one stone remains upright. The, isolated, north easterly, stone was demolished in 1963 by the landowner after a natural split developed causing it to lean to an extent that an eventual collapse would have presented a danger to livestock. Its base is still clearly visible. The standing stone was dragged to a nearby patch of marshy ground and is still partially visible in summer, when the ground is drier.



The standing stones of Duachy before the demolition of the east stone in 1963.

The most northerly stone of the line fell in December 2007. For many years the Luing cattle which graze this field had used it as a rubbing post and it was inevitable that one day it would fall. A wet autumn and saturated soil was probably the tipping point. The segment of the stone which had been underground and thus protected from the weather, is, therefore, now exposed. Interestingly, patches of red ochre are visible here and this raises the intriguing possibility that when the stones were first raised they had been painted light red. What a sight that would have been, especially at sunrise and sunset.

The centre stone of the line of three fell many years ago. No-one can remember ever seeing it upright. The southerly stone of the line of three is the only stone which remains standing. The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) measured the stones in May 1966. All four have similar girths of between 0.8 and 0.5 metres. Their heights vary from 2.8 metres (the northerly stone of the line) to at least 1.9 metres (the centre of the line stones, but it is clear that a portion at the top has been broken off and removed). The southerly line stone is 2.2 metres and the lone eastern stone was 2.5 metres.



The standing stones of Duachy in 2008.

The stones stand on a low, but wide, gravel mound some ten metres above the southern shore of Dubh Loch. They are carved from basalt-like rock, outcrops of which, in the form of dykes, are common in the area. Indeed, there is one such dyke a few dozen metres away on the north side of the burn which drains Dubh Loch. Careful examination of the area around this dyke reveals the low remains of many small stone structures, mainly circular or square in shape.

In addition there is an oblong, now recumbent, but unmoved, stone which has a girth of 0.6 metres and a length of 2.5 metres. This is very similar in size to one which the builders had started to carve from the bedrock, but never finished. The four standing stones of Duachy were carved from this same rock.

Assuming that 0.4 metres of this would have been underground if it had been erected (we can assume this from the evidence of the recently fallen stone for that is the length of that stone which is unweathered and was thus below ground) we can confidently say that it would have stood approximately 2.1 metres tall.

### **Location**

The seat is at Grid Reference NM 798,206 and the standing stones at NM 802,205. Park in the small parking area (NM 801,199) at the entrance to the forestry track at the south western end of Loch Seil. Gain the muddy farm track opposite by using the stile a little to the right of the gate. Follow the track for three or four minutes until you come to the ruined Duachy croft just before the ford across the Dubh Loch exit stream. Be aware that this is a feeding station for the cattle, and it would be unwise to have a dog with you. Next to the croft you will notice a steep track climbing to the right. Take this and you arrive at the standing stones.

To reach the seat descend the same track and turn right fording the stream which is rarely more than ankle deep. Having immediately passed through a gate you will find the Bronze Age settlement to your right and you will also notice the cut but unmoved standing stone. Through two more gates and you will have a barn to your right and an abandoned croft to your left. Looking beyond the croft you will notice a low hill about 100 metres away and about a third of the way up this hill you will see a wire fence making its way left to right. Focus on the short wooden section of this fence, leave the track and make for it. Climb over the wooden gate and immediately turn right to follow the wire for about 50 paces. You will come to the low remains of a stone wall on the left which climbs the hill. Follow this wall by walking just to its right for about 200 paces. You are now very close to the seat. In winter you should spot it at once. In summer you may have to quarter the waist high bracken

before you come across it. The seat is only five paces to the right of the wall.

### **References**

Gillies P. 1902 *Netherlorn and its Neighbourhood*, Edinburgh Press  
(see also <http://www.electricscotland.com/books/netherlorn.htm>)  
Black N., 1999 *From a Hollow on the Hill*, Nancy Black (publisher)  
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Robertson 1796, quoted in Black 1999.

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