

Department of Archaeology Annual Report 2000: Contribution from Scotland's First Settlers

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Introduction

Scotland's First Settlers was set up in 1998 as a regional study of the Mesolithic around the Inner Sound, on the Atlantic seaboard, western Scotland. Given the importance of the sea in the Mesolithic, both as a resource and for transport, the project has taken for its focus the seascape defined by Skye and the mainland: an area with a large coastline incorporating many islands.

The initial aims of the project were to identify new Mesolithic sites within the study area, which would be followed by selected excavations. Prior to SFS, three Mesolithic sites were known in the area, An Corran, in north east Skye, Redpoint in Torridan and Shieldaig, at the north end of the Applecross peninsula. Work at An Corran in the early 1990's had highlighted the potential for survival of shell midden material in the area, something which was previously thought to be rare in Scotland. Scotland's First Settlers was particularly interested in looking at shell middens in order to examine their internal composition, for information on lifestyle and environment and to examine the relationship between midden and non midden sites.

In 1999 a short test season demonstrated the great archaeological potential of the area. Survey work revealed 33 new sites and four of these were test pitted, two of which turned out to be Mesolithic (see date table). The newsletter from this first season may be found on the Internet (<http://www.pabay.org>).

Radiocarbon determinations from sites test pitted in 1999

| OxA no. | Sample ref | Radiocarbon age (BP) |
|---|--------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Ashaig 1, NG 6866 2420 | | |
| OxA-9277 | charcoal (<i>Betula</i>) | 769 ± 36 |
| OxA-9278 | charcoal (<i>Corylus avellana</i>) | 771±32 |
| OxA-9279 | charcoal (<i>Betula</i>) | 723±33 |
| Crowlin 1, NG 691 338 | | |
| OxA-9250 | charcoal (<i>Betula</i>) | 1296±39 |
| OxA-9251 | charcoal(<i>Betula</i>) | 1799±37 |
| OxA-9252 | charcoal(<i>Betula</i>) | 477±35 |
| OxA-9253 | bone, deer | 316±39 |
| Loch a Sguirr, Raasay NG 6084 5286 | | |
| OxA-9254 | charcoal (<i>Betula</i>) | 2055±39 |
| OxA-9255 | bone, deer | 7245±55 |
| OxA-9305 | charcoal (<i>Betula</i>) | 7620± 75 |
| Sand NG 6841 4934 | | |
| OxA-9280 | antler | 7520±50 |
| OxA-9281 | bone, deer | 7715±55 |
| OxA-9282 | bone, deer | 7545±50 |
| OxA-9343 | charcoal (<i>Betula</i>) | 7765±50 |

Survey and Test Pitting

Field work in 2000 was concentrated in Applecross, but survey also took place at Staffin, and on the islands of Scalpay and Pabay. The coastal survey team of Martin Wildgoose and George Kozikowski, from Skye, recorded a further 66 sites and rockshelters. This brings the total to 104, comprising 74 caves and rockshelters, 21 open lithic scatters, and 9 open shell middens, many of which have visible archaeological remains.

39 of the new sites on the Applecross peninsula and on the Crowlin islands were test pitted in order to assess preservation and date. Finds from the test pits are not only Mesolithic. Many of the rockshelters were in use in recent times and these contain relatively modern remains. Others contain evidence of earlier activity such as a fragment of Norse comb.

Limited shovel pitting was also undertaken, and it produced two new open air sites with stone tools in the vicinity of Applecross bay.

Excavation at Sand

In 1999 the rockshelter site of Sand, just to the north of Applecross, was identified as a particularly promising site with a deep stratified shell midden and stone tools. Analysis over the winter of 1999 confirmed that it was, indeed, Mesolithic (see table of dates) and so it was selected for detailed excavation in 2000. The aims of the excavation were to open and assess an area of midden and to study the surrounding area, a large grassy slope in front of the rockshelter. For this reason, two trenches were opened, across and down the site, each measuring 26m long by 2m wide.

The shell midden lies at the top of the terrace just outside the rockshelter. It lies only a few centimetres below the surface turf and extends for approximately 4x5m. The midden is made up mainly of dry limpet shells, but closer inspection reveals other shellfish, and some fish bones as well as animal and bird bones. There are also tools of bone, stone and antler, together with the waste from tool manufacture.

The unconsolidated nature of the midden and the absence of any interruptions or stabilisation layers suggest that it accumulated over a short, possibly continuous, space of time. At the time of occupation some 8000 years ago sea levels were higher and there would have been a brackish salt marsh some 30m from the site. The abundance of shells in the midden shows that the mesolithic inhabitants of Sand had chosen their spot well for there were plentiful local food resources even if larger animals were scarce in the harsh winter conditions.

Much of the midden material has still to be processed, but from the sample that has been sorted there is evidence for a variety of artefacts including: many bone limpet scoops; a varied lithic assemblage including microliths and the debris from the manufacture of stone tools; fine shell beads; a fragment of antler, probably from an unfinished harpoon; a scallop shell from which a rectangular plaque has been cut; and a boar's tusk.

Post excavation analysis will start in earnest in 2001 and generous support has been promised by Historic Scotland, though other funds are still being sought. The most important task to be undertaken at this early stage is the sorting of the samples of midden material that were brought back from the excavations. We had hoped to use local people with support from Ross and Cromarty Enterprise to work on this as excavation progressed, but in the event this could not be organised and so a lorry-load of material, carefully bagged into old fertiliser sacks and meticulously documented, was sent back to Infirmery Street.

Preliminary work from the summer of 2000 suggests that the first visitors to the rockshelter were working antler and stone to make tools. Shellfish collection, mainly of local limpets, was very important, however, and gradually the large midden pile built up over the early remains. The shellfish seem to have been cooked, for fragments of stone "pot-boilers" were abundant in the midden, together with the bevel ended bone tools that were used for extracting and processing the flesh. At the same time, the knapping of stone tools continued and items of jewelry and worked shell indicate that there was also time for other pursuits. It is clear that activities at Sand were not restricted to obtaining and processing food alone. Further material has been sent for radiocarbon dating and the results of this are awaited with interest.

Fieldwork at Sand has also included the collection of a variety palaeo-environmental information for it will be of vital importance to build a picture of the world in which the early inhabitants were living. Dynamic environmental change throughout this period is well-documented elsewhere in Scotland so that the information available from SFS will help to increase our knowledge of the early post-glacial in Scotland as a whole. Geomorphological survey by Mike Cressey, of CFA, has identified 4 relict Holocene shorelines around Sand. These provide evidence of the changes in sea level that have taken place through the ages. Preliminary analysis of the shape of a sample of prehistoric shells by Ruby Ceron of the DoA indicates that violent wave action and high storm frequency may have been prevalent at the time of collection. Collaboration with Professor Kevin Edwards at Aberdeen University will shed light on vegetational history, both on and off-site, and the project is working with Dr Robert Sheil of Newcastle University to look at the history of soil development and early land use.

The Wider Picture

The inhabitants of Sand were part of a Mesolithic network that operated across the Inner Sound and further afield. They got stone for their tools from Rum (30km to the S, a source of bloodstone), and Staffin on Skye (10km to the W, a source of baked mudstone and siliceous chalcedony). In addition they also used local stones: cherts; quartz; and agates. Analysis of these stones can help us to identify the patterns of contact, communication and movement in this part of W Scotland.

Public Communication

Several local residents worked with us during the dig and since 1999 we have been able to extend our relationship with the local community through work with the primary school and local lectures. A very successful Open Day was held, and attracted visitors from all over the north of Scotland who came to meet the archaeologists, view work taking place on site and study some of the finds. Lectures have also been given further afield, and more events are planned for 2001.

The project now has a web-site, kindly developed and hosted by Moray College:
<http://www.moray.ac.uk/ccs/settlers.htm>

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Captions:

- 1 Map of the survey area showing all sites found to date
- 2 Excavations at Sand