

Scotland's First Settlers: an investigation into settlement, territoriality and mobility during the Mesolithic in the Inner Sound, Scotland, First Results.

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Abstract

This paper presents the preliminary results of a fieldwork project combining survey, test pitting and excavation to examine the Mesolithic settlement of the Inner Sound, on the west coast of Scotland. The project has taken the relationship between settlement and the sea as its focus and as such it concentrates on coastal sites within the study area. Work is still in its infancy, but it has already demonstrated the remarkable archaeological richness of the area. First results include the identification of many new sites, several of which include midden, though not all are Mesolithic. Excavation on one site has revealed a rich midden dated to the early eighth millennium BP. It is composed mainly of limpet shells and has been initially interpreted as a rapid accumulation of material, perhaps relating to a time of famine. The midden has yielded much worked bone, shell and antler as well as lithics including microliths and finds of debitage and partially made pieces show that activities on site included tool manufacture as well as food processing. Mesolithic finds continue below the midden as well as around it, so that the midden material may be placed in a wider context. Post-excavation work is only just starting, but initial information on the use and distribution of lithic raw materials shows that wider detail, for example on transport and social contacts may well be forthcoming. Though the study area is small, there is already evidence of variation from one part of the area to another in the type of site and site combinations that relate to the Mesolithic.

Background

Scotland's First Settlers (SFS) 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 (Fig. 1).

The initial aims of the project were to identify new Mesolithic sites within the study area, which would be followed by detailed excavation of one or more sites. Prior to SFS, three Mesolithic sites were known in the area, An Corran, in north east Skye (Hardy *et al*, forthcoming), Redpoint in Torridan (Gray 1960) and Shildaig (Walker 1973), at the north end of the Applecross peninsula. Work at An Corran in the early 1990's had highlighted the potential for the survival of shell midden material in the area, something which was previously thought rare in Scotland. The Early Holocene in Scotland was a time of dynamic environmental change and this is something with which the Mesolithic population would have had to come to terms. Scotland's First Settlers is particularly interested in looking at shell middens in order both to reconstruct environmental change from surviving organic material and to examine their internal composition for information on the human lifestyle. The two can then be combined and further information drawn from related non midden sites in order to examine other issues such as the relationship between midden and non midden sites: something which has long troubled Mesolithic scholars in Scotland.

The landscape of the Inner Sound presented a variety of resources to its Mesolithic inhabitants. It is an area of deep and volatile sea speckled with islands of varying sizes. Much of the coastline is steep sided, mountainous and rocky, and slopes quickly downwards into deep water, but there are areas of more gentle coastline and in many places rocky foreshores are exposed for long periods. It is today a fertile area, both for fish and shellfish, and this was clearly the case in the past despite considerable sea level change. The deep sea lying so near the coast was clearly well used as attested by the number of deep water fish remains in the middens. At the point of writing, work has comprised a brief trial field season in 1999 and one full season in 2000. There are three main strands to the fieldwork:

- coastal survey, to identify potentially Mesolithic sites, both rockshelters and caves as well as open sites;
- test pitting to assess preservation and dating of sites;
- and finally the detailed excavation of a few selected sites.

Survey and Test Pitting

To date (Nov 2000) the coastal survey has produced 104 new sites, of which 52 have been test pitted (Fig. 2). Most of the newly found sites are rockshelters though a number of open middens and lithic scatters were also recorded. While it is as yet too early to identify how many of these sites date to the Mesolithic, a substantial number have been found to contain lithics (Fig. 3). Four of the test pitted sites from 1999 have radiocarbon determinations (Fig. 4), and two, as indicated by artefactual material (Finlayson *et al* 1999:25pp), date to the Mesolithic.

The distribution of sites at present may reflect those areas where the most intensive fieldwork has taken place (Figs 1 & 2), but it is interesting that it seems to concentrate in three specific areas: around the site of An Corran at Staffin in the north; around the southern small islands such as Pabay and Scalpay; and on the Applecross peninsula. Several stretches of coast that have been surveyed and shown to reveal no sites: in some cases this may be due to the local geomorphology (eg: the west coast of Skye to the north of Portree), but in other cases it is more likely to be due to the destruction of archaeological sites by more recent development such as farming and building (eg: the southern coastal lands around Broadford, Fig.1).

An unexpected problem in finding Mesolithic sites has been that a large proportion of the rockshelters contain rockfall (probably related to early Holocene instability) and though it is often possible to see midden material below this, test pits do not allow for its proper examination (Fig. 5). Larger scale excavation, for which the project does not have the resources, would be necessary to test for the presence of Mesolithic midden in these cases.

Excavation of a Shell Midden Site at Sand

So far, one major excavation has taken place, at Sand in the Applecross peninsula (Figs. 1 & 12). This is a rockshelter site, where an extensive midden lay just below the turf. It proved to have very good organic preservation and the finds included bevel ended and pointed bone tools and a fragment of antler harpoon (Fig 6), as well as a narrow blade microlithic assemblage (Fig. 7). The excavation was designed to look at the build up of archaeological material below the midden as well as at deposits away from the midden so that a broad picture of the whole site can be built up (Fig. 8). Sand is the only site to have been looked at so far, and even this work is preliminary, the detailed post-excavation work has yet to be done, but there are already suggestions that it may challenge some accepted wisdoms.

The shell midden at Sand was a loose unconsolidated midden comprised mainly of limpets (Fig. 9) with no stabilisation layers, deposits of non shell material or unconformities (Fig. 10). Unlike many other middens in West coast Scotland (eg: Ornsay, Mellars 1987: 184pp & 234pp) it seems therefore to have accumulated within the space of one or a few short seasons. Beneath it lay a non midden layer containing a large quantity of bone and antler debris as well as debris from the manufacture of stone tools. The relationship of this layer to the midden has still to be investigated, and it is not yet dated, but it would seem to be a clear sign that activities at Sand comprised more than the deposition of midden alone. This point is reinforced by the presence around the midden of non-midden deposits which contain Mesolithic material including microliths and other stone tools.

Nevertheless, shellfish collection and processing was clearly central to the activities taking place at Sand. Shellfish were not the only food material in use: there were finds of both animal and fish bone in the midden, but the dominance of shells (in particular limpets which comprise around 90% of all shells) suggest that they were the main food resource. The relative unimportance of fish bones in the midden also suggests that the limpets were directly consumed by the Mesolithic occupants of the Sand shelter and not, as has sometimes been suggested, used only for bait. Limpets were however, not the only shellfish. The midden contains a wide range of shells including winkles, cockles, mussels, crustacea and dog whelk.

With regard to the processing of food at Sand, the huge quantity of pot boilers and bevel ended bone tools suggest that both were integral. There is certainly abundant evidence of heat, not only in the fire-cracked stones, but also as small fragments of charcoal, though no certain *in situ* hearths were found. There were also fragments of charred hazelnut shell, presumably gathered from the surrounding woodlands, which suggest other diversity in the food resources.

Within the midden itself, there is also evidence of activities unrelated to food. There is some lithic debitage, and this, together with a fragment of harpoon that appears to have broken during manufacture (Fig. 6), suggests tool production. A worked piece of scallop shell (Fig. 11) shows that other activities, possibly relating to jewellery manufacture, were also taking place, and the presence of a perforated cowrie shell bead and small bone pieces with a double bevel end that have been tentatively interpreted as bone toggles (Fig. 6) suggest information about clothing and decoration. In this respect, the presence of an inedible shell: dog whelk, is interesting. In later periods dog whelk was harvested for the extraction of a purple dye and recent work at Smoo cave has suggested that this took place on a large scale as far back as the Neolithic (*Ceron pers com*). The harvesting of dog whelk at Sand is strongly indicative of the importance of some form of colour and art, in whatever form, to the Mesolithic inhabitants.

As the shell midden at Sand seems to have accumulated over a very short time it may have been a response to unusual conditions, such as a time of famine. If it were to represent a normal "winter's" occupation (for the sake of argument) we would expect the peninsula to be littered with similar shell middens from other years, but this is not the case (and our survey work has been very comprehensive). There are many midden sites certainly, but not all are Mesolithic, and they do not survive in the quantity to be expected if they were a normal part of the seasonal round for any substantial part of the Mesolithic in Western Scotland. Clearly, one of the lines that will be of crucial importance for the post-excavation interpretation is the investigation of seasonality. With this in mind the midden contains many otoliths which should be useful, and isotope analysis on shell samples is under discussion. Close dating of the site will also be useful.

In this respect the wider marine and environmental context of the site is very important. Geomorphological work around Sand has identified three new paleo-shorelines (Fig. 12) which suggest that at 7700 BP the sea level reached up to just below the rockshelter with a brackish marsh leading to exposed rock pools at a walking distance of some 30m. In addition, the project is working together with Professor Kevin Edwards to look at the early Holocene environment in the area, including both on-site and off-site pollen material, and with Dr Robert Shiel on soil micro-morphology. There is a possibility that the midden at Sand may date to the 8.2K environmental cooling episode (Edwards *pers com*) and this is an intriguing suggestion in the light of its possible interpretation as a response to famine conditions.

The Mesolithic Around the Inner Sound: the Wider View

Midden sites, however, clearly formed only one part of the settlement suite of the Inner Sound in the Mesolithic. SFS survey has revealed other types of sites along the coastal strip, that may form a part of this suite: in addition to three definite Mesolithic midden sites (An Corran, Loch a Sguirr, Sand), there are 23 sites with lithic scatters as well as several other middens of uncertain date. The three Mesolithic shell middens are interesting in that each is very different. Each appears to answer different needs and provides clues as to the use of the area which need to be explored further.

An Corran (Fig. 13) is a large, deep midden (Fig. 14), which appears to have been occupied on and off over a long time at least into the Neolithic (Fig. 15) (Hardy *et al.*, forthcoming; Saville 1999). It is located beside two particularly good lithic sources (baked mudstone and chalcedonic silica), and as such may have been of central importance in the Inner Sound. Preliminary analysis of the use of lithic raw materials around the Inner Sound has shown that both of these were commonly used (below). SFS survey has revealed a cluster of lithic scatter sites close to An Corran (Fig. 13) and these clearly merit further examination.

In contrast, the midden at Sand appears to be a short lived response to an extreme circumstance, such as a spell of famine. In this respect, it is well sited for shelter and to exploit a range of coastal resources including those of both shallow and deep water. Although there are other sites in the area, none are particularly close to the mesolithic midden site which almost stands out in its isolation.

Loch a Sguirr, on Raasay (Fig 1) is yet another type of site, it lies at the top of a cliff well away from the type of shallow water deposits exploited elsewhere (Fig. 16) (Finlayson et al 1999: 17pp). The midden deposits here are shallow and it is unlikely to have been an intensive shellfish processing site. There are, however clear signs of Mesolithic activity and one important factor may well have been its central location in the Inner Sound. From the hill above the site there are clear views around the Inner Sound on all sides (and some of the best mobile phone reception today). The vicinity of Loch a Sguirr has yet to be surveyed so that its mesolithic context remains unknown, but this is a gap that the project plans to fill in 2001. Whether the central island chain, where Loch a Sguirr is situated, provided a hindrance to travel across the Inner Sound in the mesolithic, or facilitated it, has yet to be determined, but the site at Loch a Sguirr is a clear indication that the Mesolithic seafarers made use of it.

One factor that stands out is that despite the relatively small size of the study area, in European terms, there is clear variation in the way in which this area was used throughout the Mesolithic. Not only is there variation among the sites themselves, as discussed above, but most of the midden and lithic sites to have been discovered, Mesolithic or not, lie in the northern half of the Inner Sound (Fig. 2). Few sites have been found to the south. One reason may be that the southern area has a long history of agriculture and development. There are lithic scatters here and an open midden: all on the islands of Scalpay and Pabay (Fig. 1). As these are not so well developed they may provide an indication of previous archaeological remains. There is also the complication of the effects of a higher sea level on the more gentle topography of the south. These are elements that the project plans to explore in the future.

Why the Inner Sound?

So far, the SFS project has demonstrated a remarkable density of survival of sites in the Inner Sound area. Whether or not this is representative of Mesolithic Scotland as a whole, it opens up certain issues for study. What were the attractions of this area in the early Holocene? The marine topography, with its numerous islands has already been touched upon: this, no doubt, facilitated both travel and settlement - both of which are central to the nomadic hunter-gatherer way of life, as commonly envisaged for the Scottish Mesolithic. This topography would also have provided a rich resource base from which various niches could be exploited including: salt and fresh/ shallow and deep water; coastal; lowland; and upland land units. Travel and contact outwith the area was also, of course, possible.

Movement is thus central to the interpretation of the way of life in the Inner Sound in the sixth - eighth millennia BP, but movement is a notoriously difficult thing to document archaeologically. Luckily for the SFS team, one of the other resources of the Inner Sound comes into play here, not only as an important resource in the Mesolithic, but also as an important resource for the archaeological researcher of today. This resource is stone (the archaeological use of stone in

this way is something that was, of course, pioneered in Scotland by John Coles in his work at Morton; Coles 1971: 294pp).

The Lithic Resources of the Inner Sound

Stone, suitable for tools, was vital to the Mesolithic population of Scotland but a general lack of good quality flint deposits meant that they had to search for, and use, a variety of other materials (Wickham-Jones & Collins 1978). The diversity of lithic materials used throughout prehistory in Scotland has been well documented elsewhere (Wickham-Jones 1986; 1990: 51pp), but previous studies have tended to focus on a fairly broad scale at the picture across the (modern) country as a whole. In general a lack of recent excavation and survey has meant that there has not been enough data from any one area for a detailed picture to be drawn. The work of Scotland's First Settlers is filling this gap for the Inner Sound and we are fortunate in that the area contains various good quality raw materials some of which are very restricted in their geographical source. What follows is a preliminary view, based on partial data, as it has not yet been possible to catalogue fully the extensive lithic collections.

There is no doubt that the lithic resources of the Inner Sound were of particular interest to its Mesolithic inhabitants. So far, the preliminary analysis of the lithic assemblages from sites round the Inner Sound has recorded the use of at least seven different lithic materials: Baked Mudstone; Rum Bloodstone; Quartz; Chalcedonic Silica; Flint; Chert; and various Agates (Fig. 17). The sources for some are spread generally across the area: quartz; and various cherts and agates, while others are much more restricted: baked mudstone; rum bloodstone, and the siliceous chalcedonies.

One of the most distinct raw materials to have been used across the area in prehistory is baked mudstone which is found on most sites and is often the main component of a lithic assemblage. The outcrops of baked mudstone are very localised, however: so far it has only been recorded as isolated bands at Staffin in the north-west of the Inner Sound (Fig. 13). Baked Mudstone is formed when pre-existing mudstones come into contact with newly formed igneous rocks and are baked in the process (Stevenson *pers com*). It tends to occur as small, isolated, rafts which may form outcrops today. Mudstone cobbles are common in the area of the outcrops and it is likely that the mesolithic community was collecting these to knap (Hardy *et al*). There is considerable variation in the outcrops, and baked mudstone generally degrades with time, but freshly obtained baked mudstone can be very hard and homogeneous, and of a shiny black appearance. It would have provided a good quality material for tools and this is no doubt reflected in the mesolithic preference for this material. It is notable that baked mudstone predominates at the sites where detailed excavation has taken place (Fig. 18) such as Sand, in Applecross and An Corran (Hardy *et al*, forthcoming).

Chalcedonic silica is another material with a restricted source which again occurs at Staffin in the north (Fig. 13) (Hardy *et al*, forthcoming). Here, it may be found as small nodules along the course of the Stenscholl river. Chalcedonic Silica was certainly an important raw material in prehistory, and it occurs on all sites, but visually it is indistinguishable to the naked eye from many of the local flints and cherty pebbles which are widely available throughout the area, especially in the east so that quantification of its use is difficult. Though further analysis is needed, the possibility remains that chalcedonic silica was transported from Staffin to other sites such as Sand in the east of the study area (especially in the light of the known movement of baked mudstone).

Implements of Rum bloodstone also occur on many sites, though in varying proportions. It seems to have been more common in the east and south of the study area and was never the main resource on any site (Figs. 17 & 18). The preliminary analysis of the material catalogued to date shows that no bloodstone cores have been recorded, and that most bloodstone occurs as flakes and chunks, suggesting that the preliminary knapping of bloodstone cores was taking place outwith the Inner Sound. There are various sources of this material, but most would not have been of use in prehistory: previous research has shown that knappable bloodstone only occurs in one place, on the island of Rum, some 30km to the SW (Fig. 19). The existence of extensive mesolithic activity on Rum is well documented (Wickham-Jones 1990) and work there confirmed that the material used for tools in prehistory was, indeed, likely to have come from Rum alone (Clarke and Griffiths 1990: 149pp). At the time it was not possible to document the nature of bloodstone exploitation in detail, but this is something which SFS hopes to investigate. At the same time, the presence at the south end of Skye of a mesolithic site comprising an extensive scatter of bloodstone tools and debitage at Camas Daraich on the Point of Sleat, overlooking Rum, has recently been confirmed by excavation (Wickham-Jones & Hardy 2000). The use and distribution of Rum bloodstone is clearly worthy of further research.

Baked mudstone, Rum bloodstone and chalcedonic silica are all homogeneous rocks of relatively good quality. In contrast, other stones such as quartz, flint, chert and agate were of varied quality. The sources of these stones were all more widespread throughout the study area. They were used on many sites, but they rarely predominate and the impression is that most were mainly used to supplement other stones. The only exception to this is quartz which, perhaps surprisingly for its unpredictable quality, dominates many of the assemblages in the north and east of the area.

So far, quartz comprised around half of many assemblages, particularly of material recovered from surface collection or test pitting. To the north, however, at the sites of Sheildaig and Redpoint it seems to have been far more important. The

excavations at Sheildaig have never been fully published (Walker 1973) but preliminary work by Ann Clarke in the 1980s showed the quartz to be of good quality and some fine pieces were made, including several microliths (Clarke 1990, 154pp). Over 6000 lithics were recovered from Sheildaig, of which 88% was of quartz. Clarke also examined existing collections from Redpoint (Gray 1960; Clarke 1990: 154pp) where the assemblage amounted to 1356 pieces, of which 80% was of quartz. In 1999 Birch re-visited Redpoint as part of the SFS project and collected another 1748 pieces from the site of which 95% was quartz (Birch 1999). As both sites lie within the study area work on these assemblages will be up-dated in the light of other local sites.

Flints and cherts are common across the area, perhaps unfortunately from our point of view, though they are mostly available only as small pebbles of variable quality. They occur in both till and gravel deposits as well as in the Applecross sandstone, and they seem to have been widely transported by both marine currents and rivers (Fig. 20). Today, most appear to be of a corticated white or cream colour, though there are odd grey examples. It is impossible to distinguish most of them by the naked eye, nor can they be easily differentiated from the Chalcedonic silicas of Staffin. For the purposes of this paper they have, therefore, been lumped together with chalcedonic silica. Silicas like this do not dominate any assemblage, but they were clearly an important part of the Mesolithic knappers' repertoire.

Other stones like agates and jaspers are also widely distributed across the area, but were only infrequently used for tools, apparently to supplement the dominant raw materials. In general, the knappers preferred to use the better quality materials, even where they had to be transported from restricted sources. None of the journeys would have been long, but all involved some complex navigation around the islands that litter the Inner Sound, the waters of which are very susceptible to sudden squalls and prolonged bad weather conditions. The journey from Rum would have involved either the navigation of the narrow and fast flowing Kyles of Rhea or land transport for some 15km along the peninsula of Sleat with a boat journey at either end.

The restricted sources of both Baked Mudstone and Rum Bloodstone, as well as the Chalcedonic silica, mean that some form of travel and contact has to have taken place. The lack of data in the past has meant that analysis of this transport remained largely conjectural, though some features have been noted previously, such as a general lack of cortical material away from the source areas (Clarke in Wickham-Jones 1990: 154pp). SFS hopes to remedy this by providing information on a number of assemblages, all collected with the same rigour. As yet the work of the project is still in its infancy, but information on knapping technologies, core types and artifact types from each site should help to provide details of the movement of stones, and therefore of people around the Inner Sound.

Acknowledgments

Many people and organisations have helped this work to take place and all are due thanks. Acknowledgment should go first to our many funders: Historic Scotland, the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, the Society of Antiquaries of London; the Prehistoric Society; The Russell Trust; Ross and Cromarty Enterprise; Leader II; The Munro fund, University of Edinburgh; many private donors; the Department of Archaeology, University of Edinburgh and the Applecross Estates Trust who have provided support in kind. Thanks go to those who put up with our intrusion into their lives and provided much support: DERA BUTEC and the Works Services department SERCO, Kyle of Lochalsh; RTB Applecross; the crew of LENIE from the RMAS; RJ Macleod Ltd; Highland Council Roads Department; Q Banting; Lorna Lumsden; and Mike Summers. The illustrations for this paper have been prepared by Kevin Hicks and Sylvia Stevenson. In addition many people joined in to provide support and physical labour including especially the volunteers from Aberdeen University and Applecross village, the staff of the Centre for Field Archaeology, Edinburgh who provided both physical assistance and much help in kind, as well as Steven Birch; Mike Chase; George Kozikowski; Fergus MacLeod; Martin Wildgoose; and, of course, the children: Carmen; Victoria; Abi; Guille; and Jamie!

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