

Scotland's First Settlers: Work on the early settlement of the Inner Sound of Skye, Scotland.

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Introduction

The Scotland's First Settlers (SFS) Project was set up in 1998 to investigate the early settlement of the Inner Sound, Skye, Scotland. It is a regional study of the Mesolithic and the earliest evidence for the Neolithic. Given the importance of the sea, both as a resource and for transport, the project has taken for its focus the seascape defined by Skye and the mainland.

The West coast of Scotland is known for a series of mesolithic shell middens containing a suite of artefacts often referred to as "Obanian", though few would now argue that such a distinct cultural entity exists. The current view considers the remains as part of a single mesolithic culture, possibly representing a functional grouping of artefacts and environmental material. Dating programmes have been used to infer that the organic artefacts preserved in the middens are chronologically indistinct from the microlith rich lithic scatters that are the most common type site from this period, though much of the dating evidence suggests that the middens do, indeed, appear late in the mesolithic sequence and that they apparently continue to be formed into the Neolithic (Connock *et al* 1992).

One of the most striking features of the early midden excavations was the complete absence of microliths, despite sieving for environmental data. Recent work on midden sites has, however, highlighted possible exceptions to the microlith distribution:

- The lower layers at Ulva Cave contain a few blades and associated lithics, with a technology similar to that of the microlith industries (Bonsall *et al* 1994).
- Early accounts of work at Risga indicated that a microlith might have been found in the midden and recent excavations have located a microlithic lithic scatter beside the original midden (Pollard *et al* 1996).
- Recent rescue excavations at An Corran discovered microliths within a midden (Hardy *et al* forthcoming).

While the midden sites clearly remain an important resource for an understanding of the early settlement of Scotland, their relationship to the lithic scatter sites needs clarification. The SFS project seeks to shed light on this and related issues through an investigation of midden sites and lithic scatters around the Inner Sound.

The preliminary season in 1999 lasted two weeks and included field survey, trial trenching and initial environmental and finds analysis. It was carried out on Skye, Raasay, the Crowlin Islands, and the Applecross peninsula (Illus 1).

Prior to August 1999, a total of 12 sites were known and a further 35 sites were recorded during the field season, (table 1). The new sites are mostly located in three areas of intensive survey (Illus 1). Table 1 identifies the sites that were found by SFS prior to and during 1999.

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Known Mesolithic sites	3
Known sites of unknown date	9
Potentially Mesolithic sites found by SFS prior to August 1999	11
Potentially Mesolithic sites found by SFS 1999	24
Total to end of fieldwork 1999	43

Table 1: Location of sites by Scotland's First Settlers to end August 1999.

Excavation Results

Crowlin 1, Crowlin Isles

The rockshelter at Crowlin consists of a large overhang sheltering a small level platform with evidence for numerous previous rock falls. Three test pits were opened to investigate the best preserved part of the midden, as well as sections in the talus material where midden and lithics had been recorded previously. The evidence suggests that the visible remains of midden post-date the rock fall events. This midden was clearly a complex accumulation of material with periods of abandonment, and the different episodes of use have apparently left different traces, suggesting that the rockshelter has had various functions over time.

Date found	Site No.	Site Name.	Location	Type
1998	SFS 2	Crowlin 1	Crowlin Isles	Rockshelter +
1998	SFS 3	Crowlin 2	Crowlin Isles	Rockshelter +
early 1999	SFS 8	Loch a Sguirr 1	Raasay	Rockshelter +
early 1999	SFS 18	Loch a Sguirr 2	Raasay	Rockshelter +
early 1999	SFS 4	Sand 1	Applecross	Rockshelter +
early 1999	SFS 5	Sand 2	Applecross	Rockshelter +
early 1999	SFS 11	Sand 3	Applecross	Sand dune +
August 1999	SFS19	Toscaig 1	Applecross	Rockshelter +
August 1999	SFS 20	Toscaig 2	Applecross	Rockshelter +
August 1999	SFS 21	Strollamus 3	Skye	Open Midden +
August 1999	SFS 22	Crowlin 3	Crowlin Isles	Boulder shelter+
August 1999	SFS 23	Crowlin 4	Crowlin Isles	Rockshelter
August 1999	SFS 24	Crowlin 5	Crowlin Isles	Rockshelter +
August 1999	SFS 25	Crowlin 6	Crowlin Isles	Old sea cave
August 1999	SFS 26	Crowlin 7	Crowlin Isles	Rockshelter +
August 1999	SFS 27	Longay 1	Longay	Sea Cave
August 1999	SFS 28	The Aird	Aird	Rockshelter
August 1999	SFS 29	An Corran B	Staffin	Lithic scatter+
August 1999	SFS 30	An Corran C	Staffin	Lithic scatter+
August 1999	SFS 31	An Corran D	Staffin	Lithic scatter+
August 1999	SFS 32	Brogaig	Staffin	Lithic scatter+
August 1999	SFS 34	Toscaig 3	Applecross	Rockshelter +
August 1999	SFS 35	Toscaig 4	Applecross	Rockshelter +
August 1999	SFS 36	Staffin Island	Staffin	Lithic scatter +
August 1999	SFS 37	Toscaig 5	Applecross	Cave
August 1999	SFS 38	Toscaig 6	Applecross	Rockshelter +
August 1999	SFS 39	Toscaig 7	Applecross	Rockshelter
August 1999	SFS 40	Toscaig 8	Applecross	Rockshelter
August 1999	SFS 41	Toscaig 9	Applecross	Rockshelter +
August 1999	SFS 42	Toscaig 10	Applecross	Rockshelter
August 1999	SFS 43	Toscaig 11	Applecross	Cave

August 1999	SFS 45	Cave of the Pigeons	An Corran	Cave
Sept 1999	SFS 44	Rubha'an Droma Bhain,	Scalpay	Lithic Scatter +

Table 2. Sites found by the Scotland's First Settlers project.

NB + = sites with visible archaeological remains

Sand 1, Applecross

The rockshelter at Sand lies above what appears to be a late glacial coastline. It consists of a shallow, but wide overhang, with a large terrace in front. In the terrace a mole hill had previously been found to contain much shell and lithics, including one microlith. A series of test pits was excavated to sample the midden, locate its extent and determine whether there was evidence for activity beyond the midden limits. A small number of additional test pits were also excavated in front of a nearby shallow rockshelter, and between the two shelters. Within the main rockshelter there appear to be no surviving deposits, however, the terrace in front of the shelter has a discrete midden deposit containing well preserved organic remains. In addition there appears to be evidence for activity around the midden in the form of a lithic scatter and fire shattered rocks.

Loch a Sguirr, Raasay

This is a substantial rockshelter with a large platform above the sea cliff at the north-western tip of Raasay. Inside the floor is very level, with some shell visible towards the back of the cave. A number of test pits were excavated within the shelter, within a small immediately adjacent shelter, on the talus slope, and on the platform in front of the shelter. The only trench to produce significant anthropogenic material was located in a small area almost entirely surrounded by boulders. This appears to be the surviving fragment of the evidence of former occupation and any deposits in the main cave would seem to have been scoured out by water action. The absence of significant quantities of shell midden material anywhere on the site suggests that occupation was never major.

Finds Analysis

Worked bone.

Eight pieces of worked bone and one fragment of bone with cut marks were found. All came from excavated contexts (table 3). Five pieces of worked bone are bevel ended and pointed, two are indeterminate pointed pieces and there is one broken off point fragment. Bevel ended tools are common in Western Scottish coastal mesolithic sites, though it is not clear for what they were used (Connock *et al* 1992).

Artefact No	Type	Site	Trench	Spit
N11	Point	Crowlin 1	1	5
N 25	Bevel ended & pointed	Loch a Sgurr 1	1	2
N 14	Bevel ended & pointed	Sand 1	2	1
N 15	Bevel ended & pointed	Sand 1	2	1
N23	Point	Sand 1	7	1
N24	Cut marked fragment	Sand 1	7	1

N 20	Point	Sand 1	9	6
N 18	Bevel ended & pointed	Sand 1	9	7
N19	Bevel ended & pointed	Sand 1	9	8

Table 3: Scotland's First Settlers 1999 The Bone Tools

Flaked Lithics

A total of 667 pieces of flaked stone were recovered. These came from a number of sites (table 4), some of which have been excavated while others relate to surface scatters.

Site Name	Total Lithic Assemblage
An Corran	1
An Corran B	60
An Corran C	14
An Corran D	5
Brogaig	17
Crowlin 1 *	31
Flodigarry +	1
Loch a Sguirr 1 *	79
Ob Gavscavaig +	2
Sand 1 *	450
Staffin Island 1	7

Table 4: Lithic Quantity by Site

NB: * = excavated site; + = raw material sample.

A variety of relatively local raw materials are represented in the assemblage (table 5). The most common stone is a Baked Mudstone first recognised on the site at An Corran (Hardy *et al* forthcoming). It is probable that the outcrops in the cliffs above the archaeological site were the main source. Quartz is the second most common raw material and is likely to be common throughout the study area. Next is a Chalcedonic Silica that is superficially similar to flint, but which has been related to pebble nodules of volcanic silicas that are found in the Staffin area (Hardy *et al* forthcoming). There are other pebble sources in the area, however (Wickham-Jones 1990) and local pebbles of chert have also been recorded (Wickham-Jones & Collins 1978). It is therefore possible that some genuine pebble flint and chert has been included here (as noted by Hardy *et al op cit*). There are also some artefacts of Bloodstone, presumably derived from Rum (Wickham-Jones 1990), and a number of other materials all in very small quantity.

The three sites where trial excavations took place produced lithic assemblages that vary greatly in size and character (table 6). Sand 1 yielded an assemblage of over 400 lithics, made from a wide variety of raw materials and including evidence of both tool manufacture and use. Among the retouched pieces were eight microliths, confirming this as a mesolithic site. Loch a Sguirr 1, in contrast, yielded a smaller lithic assemblage, mainly of quartz. Crowlin 1, also yielded a small assemblage with less variation of raw material, and comprising mainly

	Chalcedonic Silica	Baked Mudstone	Bloodstone	Quartz	Quartzite	Flint	Agate	Jasper	Rock Crystal	Coarse Stone	Unknown
An Corran	1										
An Corran B	31	28		1							
An Corran C	10	4									
An Corran D	3	2									
Brogaig	10	6		1							
Crowlin 1	25	1		3	1	1					
Flodigarry	1										
Loch a Sguirr 1	5	22		52							
Ob Gavscaivaig	2										
Sand 1	70	192	31	140	3		4	4	2	3	1
Staffin Island	6	1									
TOTAL	164	256	31	197	4	1	4	4	2	3	1

Table 5: Raw Material by site, absolute numbers.

evidence for tool manufacture. Of the surface collections, only An Corran B produced a lithic assemblage of any size, and this was very mixed.

Coarse Stone Tools

A total of seventeen pieces of coarse stone came from four different sites comprising a variety of artefacts and manuports (table 7). These tools are made of a variety of raw materials, though sandstone predominates. The six manuports were collected because they stood out dramatically from the angular pieces of rock which provided the background material in the rockshelters and middens. Hammerstones are ubiquitous on archaeological sites, but bevel ended tools are commonly associated with mesolithic sites, thus confirming the general period indicated by the microliths at Sand 1.

Discussion

The density of sites around the coastline was much higher than anticipated and the great value of the seascape of the Inner Sound as a resource for the study of the mesolithic and subsequent periods is clearly demonstrated. While the age of the surveyed sites is still unknown, their nature suggests that many are early prehistoric, probably mesolithic. Few areas of Scotland have such a density of sites and this is particularly important for an understanding of the way in which sites operated as part of a network. It is, of course, possible that each site relates to different periods of time, but even at this stage the work demonstrates that a detailed picture of the use of the Inner Sound seascape throughout early prehistory can be reconstructed.

The assessment excavations showed that in general the sites have good organic preservation and some stratification thus increasing their value as an archaeological resource, though as threats were identified to most of the sites this resource may be at risk.

The initial studies of the artefacts demonstrate their great value as an archaeological resource in terms of both the richness and variety of material present. Good organic preservation means that a range of bone tools has been preserved as well as the lithics. This is quite unusual and affords the possibility to study the interrelationship of these two materials which should help to shed light on the interpretation of previously excavated sites. Particularly exciting is the presence of classic narrow blade microliths in the midden at Sand 1 together with bevel ended bone tools. The role of the microlith is still poorly understood and it is only through the excavation of sites with extensive preservation, such as Sand 1, that this may be improved

With regard to the lithics one of the most noteworthy factors is the wide range of materials in use. The Mesolithic has traditionally been regarded as a period of high mobility and networking between individual sites, though this is generally hard to prove. Detailed identification and sourcing of the lithic materials is an important way in which human movement may be inferred.

It is now clear that there was no overall Mesolithic culture across Scotland. Recent work has moved towards the identification of cultural areas in the European Mesolithic and, though the situation in Scotland is still unclear, work in the Southern Hebrides has started to address the problem (Mithen forthcoming). In order to establish the pattern of regional variation a programme of excavation and dating within one well defined area is particularly important. In this respect, identification of a suite of artefacts, lithic and otherwise, in use around the

Inner Sound throughout the Mesolithic will be a valuable addition to this field. The presence in the

	Pebbles	Bipolar Cores	Platform Cores	Debitage Flakes	Chunks	Regular Flakes	Blades	Microliths	Edge Retouched	Scrapers	Gunflint	Barbed and Tanged Point	Misc. Retouch	TOTAL
An Corran									1					1
An Corran B		1	1	7	23	26	1			1				60
An Corran C				4	5	5								14
An Corran D				3	1	1								5
Brogaig				4	3	8			2					17
Crowlin 1 *		1		16	6	7					1			31
Flodigarry + Loch a Sguirr 1*	1			9	45	20	5							79
Ob Gavscavaig +	2													2
Sand 1 *	11	6	1	67	121	210	18	8	4	2		1	1	450
Staffin Island 1			1			6								7

Table 6: Assemblage Content by Site

NB: * = excavated sites; + = isolated raw material sample

	Rounded hammerstone	Long hammerstone	Hammerston e flake	Ground edge tool	Bevel ended tool	Smoothed stone	Rubbing stone	Anvi l	Manuport	TOTAL
Ashaig	1									1
Crowlin 1	1			1	1	1		1	2	7
Sand 1			2		1		1		4	8
Toscaig 1		1								1
TOTAL	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	6	17

Table 7: Coarse stone tools.

middens of material suitable for radiocarbon determination becomes of great importance here and specific dates are awaited.

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