

Scotland's First Settlers: Newsheet 1999.

The Scotland's First Settlers project got off to a very good start in 1999 and we have already gone some way towards fulfilling the objectives set out in our original leaflet. Although work such as ours reveals information on many periods we are primarily concerned with the coming of the first hunters and fishers after the end of the last Ice Age some 10,000 years ago, up to the introduction of farming some 6000 years ago. Archaeologically, therefore, the project covers the Mesolithic and early Neolithic periods.

The excavations

During August 1999 we spent two weeks carrying out fieldwork on and near Skye.

The primary aim was to assess whether our initial feelings about the Mesolithic settlement of the area were realistic. The Inner Sound is often regarded as off the beaten track and relatively inhospitable, but this was not so in the past. The early settlers relied on water for transport and to provide many resources and the Inner Sound thus had many attractions for them. We are hoping that the project will provide valuable new insights into the earliest inhabitants, their origins, and their way of life. Also, as this was a time of great climatic change we shall be exploring how they coped with the changing conditions around them.

In order to do this, the first season concentrated on testing four previously recognised sites to assess their dates of occupation, size, and levels of preservation. Each site had already yielded evidence of refuse remains (known as midden) as well as bone and stone tools.

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 stone tools (lithics) had been recorded previously. The evidence suggested 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 had been used at many different times in the past.

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 a small arrowhead characteristic of the early settlers (a microlith). A series of test pits were 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 and tools. 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.

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The survey.

A major part of the project is to survey the coastline for possible early sites. The nature of the Inner Sound with its many islands and indented lochs means that this is a huge undertaking so that at first we shall be

concentrating on specific areas where the conditions look particularly promising for the location, preservation, and discovery of archaeological material. In the long run the survey work will broaden out.

Before the project began 12 sites of possible Mesolithic date (including three certain Mesolithic sites) were known in the study area.

During August 1999, three areas were targeted by the survey team. These ran from the northern tip of Skye to the area around Kilt Rock; the entire coastline of the Crowlin Islands and the coastline from Toscaig, north to Applecross. 36 new sites were found, most containing visible evidence of shell midden. While this is an outstanding number of sites, we do not yet know how many relate to the Mesolithic. It is likely, however, that several will be early. This leaves us with the huge task of testing all these sites, and taking dating samples. Many of the sites are quite close together and it is important to remember that the Mesolithic period alone lasted for over 4000 years. The population in the Mesolithic was unlikely to have been great, but individual sites may have been occupied at different times throughout the period. Excavation and dating should help to clarify this.

Environmental info

Environmental information is vital to our rounded picture of the early settlers and the world within which they lived. One important source of change lies in the height of sea level. This has not always been static, so that local coastal conditions were not always as they appear today. The reconstruction of the early post glacial shorelines is particularly important for the project because the sea, and adjacent coastlands, were so important to the mesolithic population. Not only did they provide rich sources of food, they were also main avenues of transport and communication and they provided both sheltered areas suitable for settlement and access into the hinterland.

Coastal change is particularly complex because the sea both rose and fell in the first few millennia after the end of the Ice Age. When the ice melted sea level rose as vast quantities of water were released. Gradually, however, the land, which had been pushed down by the weight of the ice, began to bounce back with the effect that sea levels dropped once again. Though rapid to a geologist, these changes were slow in human terms so that discrete shorelines were created. These shorelines vary in height in different places, so it is not a simple task to reconstruct them around the study area and so far only very simple work has been undertaken. In places the main post-glacial shoreline is clearly visible and it is here that many of the Mesolithic sites are most likely to be found.

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Environmental samples were also taken from all the excavated sites and will in due course be sent off for radiocarbon determinations. This enables us to assess the ages of the sites and we hope to have the results by next year's report.

The Artefacts

Excavation of the above sites produced many artefacts: tools made of stone and bone.

Bone Tools.

Eight pieces of worked bone and one fragment of bone with cut marks were found. Six pieces of worked bone and the cut marked fragment came from Sand while one bone point came from Crowlin and one from Loch a Sguirr. Most of these bone tools are bevel ended and pointed tools. Bevel ended tools are common in Western Scottish coastal mesolithic sites, and they are thought to be associated with the processing of marine resources among other things.

Stone Tools

A total of 667 pieces of flaked stone were recovered. These came from a combination of both excavated and surveyed sites. Although many flaked stone pieces were found, only a few can be used as indicators of date.

Stone is by far the most common and longest lasting of all materials used for tool making throughout human history, and it is only by identifying specific techniques, or tool types, that they may be used to help date a site.

During the Mesolithic people were making and using microliths, tiny pieces of flaked stone that would have been slotted into hafts of bone, antler or wood to make a variety of tools. These pieces, and the technology by which they were made, do not occur on more recent sites, so the presence of microliths, at Sand for example, is an indication that a site must have been in use between 10,000 and 6000 years ago.

Study of the raw materials of the tools is also a vital part of the project. The early inhabitants of the Inner Sound used a variety of raw materials most of which may be traced to distinct sources, and by identifying these sources it is possible to reconstruct the networks within which people operated. The mesolithic was a time when people were highly mobile, moving from place to place at different times of the year, so it is very important for us to get an idea of the distances over which they had contact. The most common stone is a Baked Mudstone from An Corran, Staffin, in north east Skye. Quartz is the second most common raw material and is thought to be common throughout the study area. Next is a Chalcedonic Silica similar to pebble nodules of volcanic silicas that are found in the Staffin area and elsewhere in the locality. Finally, there are also some artefacts of Bloodstone. The only known source of Bloodstone to have been used is on the island of Rum, where early Mesolithic settlement has already been discovered.

Site Protection

The project has a twofold role in that the identification of sites, and their dating will help us to understand the Mesolithic occupation of this area. Equally important however, is that by locating the sites, we are able to afford them some protection. Excavation is expensive and time consuming and many will never be excavated, it is also a destructive process so that in general it is better to leave sites untouched for the future. Our techniques are always developing and every year we learn more about the sites we do explore, so that the preservation of sites is the best option, to maintain a resource for future generations. In order to preserve the sites it is important that they are valued and understood by everyone. The support of the local community is vital to this, and we shall also be working with Historic Scotland. In this way, we hope that one of the lasting benefits of our work will be the identification and protection of sites throughout our study area.

Next year (2000)

The success of this year's fieldwork means that we have created a realistic base from which to predict that we shall be able to provide new information about the earliest settlement of the Inner Sound. The number of sites found has already changed the way in which the occupation of western Scotland at the end of the Ice Age is understood. In place of the sparse, widely separated, groups of nomadic people previously imagined, we are now faced with the possibility that populations may have been much greater. We know, from the raw material studies, that they operated within a network that extended as far as the island of Rum.

One of the particularly interesting aspects of the survey is the great number of sites that retain organic evidence. Organic remains are generally destroyed over the millennia, particularly in the acidic soils so common to western Scotland, so that archaeological interpretation has to be based on stone tools alone. Here we have the opportunity for a much rounder picture. Next year, work on the environmental remains will be particularly important. For example, it is possible to recover information on the seasons of occupation, and storminess of the weather by examining things like the relative sizes of shells and the type and age of fish caught. Studies of pollen and charcoal may be used to reconstruct the environment and vegetation cover and other climatic indicators, such as different types of land snails, are also useful. A combination of all these environmental and climatic indicators together with the archaeological remains may be used to recreate the annual round and networks of the occupants. For how long and when, for example, did people move into the rockshelter on the Crowlin Isles? Were they deep sea fishers? What distances did they cover in their skin covered boats and log canoes? What was the climate like? And how did it fluctuate over the period in which we are interested? Finally, when their neighbours on the mainland started to settle down and farm the land how long did it take before they followed suit?

Finally.

This project has only been possible with the support of many people. We should like to thank in particular: the British Academy; The Society of Antiquaries of Scotland; The Society of Antiquaries of London; The Prehistoric Society; The Russell Trust; The Percy Hedley Foundation; The University of Edinburgh; Skye Local Enterprise. In addition we would like to thank the many individuals who have given us support, both in

terms of physical and financial gifts and in terms of their interest. We think it is fun, and important, to learn about our past, we hope that you do too. We would like to thank you all for your support of our project. We are already looking for funding for next year, to base ourselves in Applecross from the 15 April - 17th May 2000. We shall continue to excavate Sand, in addition to testing many of those sites we found in that area this year, and continuing with the detailed survey of the Applecross peninsula. Hopefully we might see many of our supporters then. There will be an Open Day and this will be advertised locally, but visitors are welcome at any time. In addition, we have lectures planned for November 1999 in Applecross and Sleat and there will be other talks during the fieldwork in 2000. We look forward to seeing you then.

Best Wishes for the new millennium!

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