

Scotland's First Settlers: Newsletter 2000

Introduction

Scotland's First Settlers was set up in 1998 as a regional study of the earliest settlement (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. Further information on this first season may be found on the Internet (<http://www.pabay.org>) or obtained, for a donation of £10, from the address below.

In 2000 project work concentrated in and around the Applecross peninsula. Coastal survey, test pitting and excavation of a Mesolithic midden at Sand were all carried out.

Map

Work pic

Survey and Test Pitting

The coastal survey team of Martin Wildgoose and George Kozikowski recorded a further 66 sites and rockshelters this year. This brings our total to 104. These comprised 74 caves and rockshelters, 21 open lithic scatters, and 9 open shell middens, many of which had visible archaeological remains. Survey work was concentrated in Applecross but throughout the year survey has also taken place at Staffin, and on the islands of Scalpay and Pabay.

39 of these new sites were test pitted this year in order to assess preservation and date. In addition to sites on the Applecross peninsula, test pitting also incorporated sites on the Crowlin islands. 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 this fragment of Norse comb. This is a particularly interesting find because it was broken during manufacture and provides some evidence of the sort of activities undertaken in early historic times.

Pic of bone comb

shovel pitting pic?

Martin and his team also did some shovel pitting. This is a way of looking for sites with no surface remains 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 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.

Pic of excav

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 shell fish, 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. Much of the midden material has still to be processed, but from the sample that has been sorted there is evidence for fine shell beads and other items that may have been used for jewelry such as a boar's tusk.

The unconsolidated nature of the midden and the absence of any interruptions or stabilisation layers suggest that it had accumulated over a short, possibly continuous, space of time. It may be that the occupants of the rockshelter had selected this as a sheltered spot to pass a particularly bad winter. 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 they had chosen their spot well for there were plentiful local food resources even if larger animals were scarce in the harsh winter conditions.

Pic of finds

pics of finds

a fragment of antler, probably from an unfinished harpoon;
scallop shell from which a rectangular plaque has been cut;
a perforated cowrie shell bead;
many bone limpet scoops like these were found and they may have been associated with processing the limpets;
a boar's tusk.

Post excavation analysis will focus on unravelling the human activity that lead to the accumulation of the midden. Preliminary work 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 inhabitants of Sand were clearly cooking the shellfish for fragments of stone "pot-boilers" were abundant together with bevel ended bone tools that may have been 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

site plan and pics

As archaeologists we are not interested only in the people of Sand, but also in their wider world. Examination of otoliths (the ear bones from some fish) will help to pinpoint the season at which the Mesolithic settlers camped at Sand and this can be amplified by isotope analysis of the shells. Detailed analysis of the environmental remains from the midden will help to build up a picture of the conditions on the Applecross peninsula at the time and wider analysis will look at things like vegetation and even weather.

Work pic

Geomorphological survey by Mike Cressey has identified 4 relict Holocene shorelines around Sand. These provide evidence of the changes in sea level that have taken place through the ages.

The Wider Picture

Inner Sound pic

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

Many visitors came to the Open Day to meet the archaeologists. Visitors could view work taking place on site and study some of the finds. In addition several local residents answered our call for help to work with us on finds processing during the dig.

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Leader II

Private donations

open day pic

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.

On a clear day the locations of the Mesolithic Sites at An Corran and Loch a Sguirr can be seen from the top of the Sand rockshelter and this is an important indicator for us of the wider world which the Mesolithic population of the Inner Sound inhabited.

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Scotland's First Settlers is a research project of the Department of Archaeology at Edinburgh University. **Directors: Karen Hardy and Caroline Wickham-Jones**

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