

## **A Diet of Limpets? New work by the Scotland's First Settlers Project on the Early Settlement of the Inner Sound, West Scotland.**

Scotland's First Settlers was set up in 1998 to investigate the early settlement of the Inner Sound area between Skye and the mainland. It aims to break new ground as a sea-scape project looking at the relationship between the early inhabitants of the area and the sea. Work is concentrated on the coastal areas, taking into account both current and ancient coastlines, in order to gather information on the lifestyle of the nomadic Mesolithic dwellers who used these coasts between 9000-5000 years ago.

The work of the project comprises three main strands: coastal survey; test pitting; and excavation. At the time of speaking, survey work has found an astonishing 131 new sites. These comprise 100 caves and rockshelters, 22 open lithic scatters, and 9 open shell middens. Of the newly found sites 48 have been test pitted, in order to assess preservation and date. Although some sites have yielded stone tools, suggesting a prehistoric date, not all of the test pitted sites are Mesolithic. At the last count 10 sites had finds that definitely suggested a Mesolithic date. As part of the survey work a small amount of shovel pitting has also been carried out, mostly around Applecross Bay, and it has resulted in the location of two new open air sites with stone tools of uncertain date.

So far detailed attention has concentrated on the rockshelter site of Sand, just to the north of Applecross. This was found in 1998 and test pits in 1999 showed there to be a limpet midden which was dated in that year to c. 6500 BC. It was thus earlier than many shell midden sites. Sand was therefore selected for detailed excavation in 2000. The site comprises a shallow rockshelter, facing E. There is no apparent archaeological preservation within the shelter, but midden material is preserved immediately in front of the shelter at the upper end of a grassy apron. The shell midden lies only a few centimetres below the surface turf and extends for approximately 4x5m. It is a deeply stratified midden made up mainly of unconsolidated dry limpet shells, but other shell fish, together with fish bones as well as animal and bird bones were also found. Excavation yielded a variety of tools of bone, stone (including narrow blade microliths) and antler, together with waste from tool manufacture. In addition, there were artefacts of worked shell, including fine cowrie shell beads and cut scallops. Unlike other midden sites, there was no evidence for structures within the area excavated, neither within the midden, nor along side it. Away from the midden excavation showed that, as expected, organic preservation deteriorated rapidly, but there were still quantities of flaked stone.

Detailed post-excavation work is only just starting, but a few general points may be made. Shell middens can now be seen to occur throughout the Mesolithic and are not as rare a feature of the Scottish Mesolithic as once thought (though there are clearly different types of shell midden, so that differentiation through time may well be found). SFS has also documented several lithic scatter sites with early potential so that the data base of Mesolithic information has been greatly extended. With regard to the artefacts: microliths have been shown conclusively to occur on midden sites, both in association with the midden and away from it. Further work will take place on both the bone and antler tools as well as the working of shell.

An important feature of SFS is also the broader picture that may only be obtained through the study of a geographical area such as the Inner Sound. Individual sites do not exist in isolation and this is nowhere more true than in the Mesolithic: a time of nomadic and sophisticated use of the land. Initial information linking sites, and documenting contact and movement is coming from various aspects of the project, but the analysis of the lithic raw materials promises to be especially interesting. The project has documented certain very specific outcrops of good knapping stone, all of which were used in prehistory. Baked Mudstone from Staffin and Bloodstone from Rum, are among the two most specifically sourced and best known. Along with other materials such as Chalcedonic Silica, flint, quartz, agates and chert these stones were used in differing amounts on individual sites and the patterns of use should help to build up a picture of the networks of contact within in the Mesolithic.

The project is also concerned to document environmental change in the early Holocene, and the human responses to this. Detailed work on sea-level change, pollen analysis, and soil development is underway. The use of the abundant shell fish remains have a part to play here for they are an important indicator of changing marine conditions and they may also help with information on the seasonality of the various sites.

A basic web-site for the project has already been developed and it is hoped to keep this up to date with new information as work develops: [www.moray.ac.uk/ccs/settlers.htm](http://www.moray.ac.uk/ccs/settlers.htm).

Finally it is important to acknowledge the many sponsors and individuals who have played a vital role in the success of the project. Scotland's First Settlers is a research project of the Department of Archaeology,

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